



EXPANSIONS

COMPETITION AND CONQUEST IN
EUROPE SINCE THE BRONZE AGE

AXEL KRISTINSSON

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**Competition and Conquest in
Europe since the Bronze Age**

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Axel Kristinsson

ReykjavíkAkademían

For my mother,
INGIBJÖRG ÞORKELSDÓTTIR

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PREFACE

May 23rd, 2004 was a fine spring Sunday and I spent the morning lying comfortably on my sofa, reading K. Kristiansen's excellent archaeological study *Europe Before History*. A few months earlier, after some unpleasantness, I had quit my humdrum job as the curator of the Borgarfjörður Heritage Centre. Since then I had done a lot of reading and Kristiansen's book was proving to be the most inspiring yet. While reading about the problem of oscillating social stratification in prehistoric Europe, I was struck by an idea that I felt could explain these changes. I soon realized that this could have much wider implications and the same sort of thing could easily have occurred in many different places at different times. Most of the day was spent briefly reviewing several likely cases and, finding that all of them seemed to fit my hypothesis, I started writing this book in the evening. There was nothing else I could do.

Starting the book was easy, finishing it took longer than anticipated, and it was only in January 2009 that I could say it was more or less complete. These five years were the most productive and enjoyable of my academic life. The work was not only its own reward but also spawned several new ideas that I suspect will last me for the rest of my life. At the same time I had to reinvent myself as a historian. Up until this time I had primarily been concerned with Icelandic medieval and early modern history. Now, I rediscovered why I had decided to study history in the first place. A quarter of a century earlier, I had entered the University of Iceland wanting to study the history of mankind but all I got was the history of Iceland. It was a small national university burdened with the patriotic sentiments of a newly independent nation. Everyone, professors and students alike, concentrated on Icelandic history, at most seeing world history as a sort of background.

I am not proud to say that I gradually fell in line with this way of thinking, although I would like to believe that I was among those Icelandic historians that were open to outside ideas. Having the idea for this book came as a wake-up call. Not only did I have to begin thinking seriously about more than just my homeland's history but, as a result of the nature of the idea, also about larger patterns in human history – something historians rarely do. I became a macro-historian, someone not just concerned with telling stories or explaining specific events but rather engaged in discovering general rules and patterns of human history – the laws of history, if you like. Since most historians are rather down-to-earth, concrete thinkers it shouldn't come as a surprise that few of them take much notice of macro-history. Most

macro-historians have a background in sociology, political science or anthropology and a macro-historian who actually *is* a historian can get rather lonely at times.

The positive side to this, of course, is getting acquainted with all sorts of new and important ideas that are not usually employed in historical study but which can nevertheless help shed a completely new light on human history. My first divergence from traditional historical thought came when I spent a year in Copenhagen in the early nineties and became rather bored. For me, boredom is the mother of inspiration since my thoughts and interests tend to wander to new places. In this case they wandered to complexity theory, which to me provided a completely new way of thinking about human society and its history. This became an important theoretical foundation for my approach to history, lately joined by evolutionary theory, especially multilevel and group selection as advanced by D.S. Wilson. In my mind the two are closely related, and had I come to know Wilson's work sooner, the first chapter of this book would have been written somewhat differently, even if the basic thought would be the same. As I write this, I am looking forward to meeting Wilson for the first time, as he will be visiting Iceland next month.

The time I spent writing this book was both rewarding and enjoyable. However, it was also a difficult time. For me, as for most independent scholars, research is more of a calling than a profession and one has to be ready to accept severe financial difficulties. The academic grants system has a habit of viewing every original idea with deep suspicion, especially if it comes from someone without university tenure. Nevertheless, Hagþenkir, The Icelandic Association of Academic and Educational Authors (<http://hagthenkir.is>), supported the conclusion of this work, for which I am especially grateful.

Another kind of difficulty comes from inhabiting a small country where the largest university library is poorly financed and has a correspondingly poor selection of scholarly works, especially ones that have no special relevance to Iceland. The Icelandic countrywide access portal to electronic databases and e-journals (<http://hvar.is>) proved to be very useful for accessing international journals. However, as the portal neither includes every important publication nor provides full access to all articles, it is no substitute for a real university library. Inevitably, I was sometimes forced to cut corners when trying to find relevant sources but I hope this is not too noticeable and that I may be forgiven such imperfections.

This book is published in cooperation with the Reykjavík Academy (<http://www.akademia.is>), an organization of independent scholars of

which I have been a member since its foundation in 1997. I owe a great debt to this community for its inspiration and support over the years.

Finally I must thank my brother, Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson, professor of political science at the University of Iceland, and my good friend and colleague, Árni Daníel Júlíusson, both of whom read the manuscript at various stages and made many useful comments. My old friend Rab Christie considerably improved my English and I hope comments made by my mother (87 years old and as lively as ever) have helped make the book more accessible to the general reader.

Reykjavík, August 31st 2010

1. HISTORY AS BIOLOGY

We are animals and the study of animals belongs to the realm of biology. I do not wish to sound extreme but the logic is inescapable. Our societies belong to the same general category as the societies of wolves or ants – groups of animals living together, interacting and depending on each other for their survival. Humans may very well be more interesting than either wolves or ants (at least to ourselves) and our societies are far more complex, which is why several scientific disciplines are dedicated to researching them. Nevertheless, they are *the same sort of things* as the societies of other animals, which is why we can expect some general principles of biology also to apply to humans and human society. In particular, human history should have some affinities to evolutionary biology. The evolution of human societies is the evolution of biological phenomena and the principles of evolution established by Charles Darwin might prove illuminating for human history as well.¹

Many practitioners of the social sciences may find it demeaning to relegate their disciplines to a subset of the biological sciences. However, it is not my intension to trivialize the social sciences, but rather to question the rigid division between disciplines, often found in academia. The world we live in is not neatly divided into separate spheres with biology in one, sociology in another, physics in yet another and so on. Instead we are faced with an awful mess comprising 'life, the universe and everything'.² Dividing our scientific enquiry into disciplines is simply a way of sharing out the incredible workload we face when we try to make sense of the world. Specializing in a small chunk of reality often leads to a better understanding of that part of reality than if we try to understand everything at once. So, specialization is a sensible division of labour, but we shouldn't imagine that reality gives a toss about our neat, traditional categories.

Looking rationally at everything the universe contains, we find that it is made of entities such as space, energy and matter. Some of this matter has the ability to self-organize and replicate. This is what we call life and its study belongs to the realm of biology, in its most general sense. Some living entities acquire a higher level of organization under which several of them form bonds of cooperation. These we call societies, of which our own human version is only one of many. It is in this sense that I relegate the social sciences and history in particular to the realm of biology. This does not mean that historians will now have to start learning everything about enzymes or dissecting frogs. What it does mean is that the general principles of

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the biological world are also relevant to human society and history. Things we know from 'nature', such as natural selection, parasitism, mutualism, divergent or convergent evolution, competition and cooperation, all have their counterparts in human society.

Genes, Memes and Competition

The single feature that makes human society stand out among animal societies is that it is largely based on culture. The behaviour of most species is determined almost exclusively by their genes. Only a few, like chimpanzees or ravens, have some significant behavioural patterns that are learned from parents or other members of their groups and are therefore cultural rather than genetic.³ But no species on earth comes anywhere close to being ruled as much by culture as humans. This is a defining element of humanity, because it allows us to escape the confines of our genetic programming.

Genetic evolution is an extremely slow process depending on random mutations and a reshuffling of genes to produce solutions that are beneficial to survival. These new genes then only become dominant over many generations as their benefits slowly assert themselves in the population. Significant changes often take millions of years.

Social evolution, when based on culture rather than genes, works on an entirely different timescale.⁴ This is because cultural elements are not as rigid as genes and change much more easily. Neither are they confined to Darwinian evolution in the strictest sense. Before Darwin put forth his ideas on natural selection, others had speculated about how species changed and evolved. The most famous of these predecessors was Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who thought that characteristics acquired during life could be inherited. However, Darwin showed that the mechanism of biological evolution was based rather on the natural selection of random mutations, and the Lamarckian approach has been thoroughly discredited in biology. Despite this, Lamarckian evolution applies quite well to culture. Not only can cultural elements be acquired during life, they must be acquired that way by necessity. They are also passed on, not only to biological descendants but to anybody receptive to them. Therefore, cultural elements can spread themselves much faster than genes and the abilities they install affect individuals and groups much more quickly than any genetic change could.

And yet, cultural evolution may have something that resembles genes. Richard Dawkins has coined the term *meme* for a cultural

element that copies itself from one human brain to the next.⁵ In his parlance they are *replicators* whose sole purpose in life is to make copies of themselves in the same way as genes. Unlike genes, whose medium is the microscopic world of molecules, memes do not actually have a tangible physical existence but are rather ideas that use human communication to spread themselves around. In fact, according to Dawkins, they are very much like viruses that infect our minds, an analogy that becomes especially potent in his treatment of religion, which in his view is an especially virulent and nasty kind of meme.⁶

Dawkins' memes are an extremely interesting attempt to apply biological principles to human society, but perhaps he doesn't go far enough. When one considers how memes affect individuals, perhaps all one can do is to see them as self-replicating viruses spreading from mind to mind. But as we shall see in the next section of this chapter, life exists on several levels of organizational complexity. These range from genes and molecules to cells, and multicellular organisms, all the way to whole societies, some of which are governed exclusively by genes but others also by memes. A cultural (or memetic) society, such as our own is simply another level in the hierarchy of biological complexity.

Human societies, especially when they are organized in discreet political units, can behave as something similar to a biological organism. They compete with each other and struggle for survival, and this survival largely depends on their culture and internal organization. Therefore, it should be obvious that the memes prevalent in a political unit can profoundly affect its survival. Of course, survival not only depends on ideas in the strict sense of the term, but also on all the kinds of relationships between people that turn a collection of individuals into a society; economic, social and political ties, as well as ideological ones. Although such ties may all have their ideological aspects, they are not only ideologies, but may also be based, for example, on technology, the use of force or the exchange of valuables. If what we can term the meme pool of a polity includes not only ideas copied from mind to mind but all the behavioural patterns of human society, in other words its entire culture, it would truly describe a polity in a similar way to that in which genes describe a living organism.⁷ These memes would define these polities and profoundly affect their survival, especially when in competition with other polities. The survival of polities would, in turn, determine the survival of their meme-packages resulting in a 'natural' selection of memes. The memes that survived would be the memes that support the survival of a polity, which in this case can be seen as

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a coalition of memes working together for their mutual benefit. According to Dawkins, this is exactly how genes cooperate in making *survival machines*, in other words, the bodies of the organisms that carry them. From this point of view, polities are the survival machines of memes.

Of course, there would be freeloaders. Just as in nature, some memes refuse to cooperate and attempt rather to replicate as free agents, viruses or parasites that prey on polities and often damage their chance of survival. Such is the way of the world. Dawkins himself would see religion as such a damaging agent but, as it is fairly ubiquitous in human society and I can find no evidence of its negative effect on the survival of polities, I would doubt this.⁸

The survival of memes, like that of genes, works through a kind of 'natural' selection, except in this case it would probably be better to speak of *political* selection. Not all memes survive and not all polities survive. This is a world of limited resources and the demand for them is much greater than the supply. Consequently, there will be competition and the outcome of this competition will determine the survival of memes and polities.

The concept of competition first made serious inroads into scientific study through economics, especially the works of Adam Smith (*The Wealth of Nations*, first published 1776), who saw competition in the free market as the ideal driving force of economic development, a view that has become almost universal in modern economics. Charles Darwin brought this notion into the natural sciences with his *On the Origin of the Species* (1859), in which he explained the evolution and diversity of the natural world as being a result of natural selection. According to Darwin, the characteristics of those individuals who have the greatest reproductive success gradually become dominant and, as different environments favour different qualities, species slowly diverge and multiply. Reproductive success is usually determined through some sort of competition – for food, sex, efficient metabolism, escape from predators and suchlike. Male peacocks compete with each other for the favours of females by displaying their magnificent tails. Cheetahs compete with each other, their prey and other predators by maximizing their speed and agility. For them, speed and agility is the key to acquiring food, a necessary precondition for reproduction. Competition can even take the form of cooperation, by which a group of individuals band together to increase their common competitive edge. Societies, human and others, are precisely such cooperative groups that improve their members' collective competitiveness.

Just as competition has become a key notion in modern economics, Darwinism has become dominant in biology and related sciences, and with good reason since it offers an unsurpassed insight into the workings of earth's biological system.

The mechanics of competition may be described in the following general terms. The agents (molecules, individuals, companies, species, polities etc.) compete with each other for space and resources, with the more competitive forms or structures multiplying at the expense of others. In the evolution of life, this multiplication comes in the shape of physical reproduction by which life-forms copy themselves, with or without mixing their genes. Conversely, the multiplication of successful company strategies in economics takes the rather less messy form of encouraging other firms to copy those strategies. In either case, however, competition drives evolution.

Complexity

Systems, biological or economic, in which agents interact (e.g. through competition) are known as *complex systems*. In fact, the economy is only a subsystem of the more general one that is human society, which in turn can be seen as a subsystem of the biological world. But not all complex systems are biological. Other examples may include the weather, a pile of sand or even a bucket of water. All are made up of *agents* that interact with each other in a complex way, not only through competition but also by cooperating or simply bumping into one another. The study of complex systems is a recent multidisciplinary science that has been developing rapidly over the last two or three decades.⁹ This science can be seen as an offshoot of chaos theory, which is often exemplified by the famous butterfly in the Caribbean that flaps its wings and thereby causes a typhoon in China or some such place. By moving just a little bit of air by its wing-flapping, a chain of events is set in motion. The molecules of air moved by the butterfly bump into other molecules which then collide with others and so on and so forth. In this way the effects of the butterfly gradually spread around the globe, changing the weather in the process. Of course, this does not change the fact that typhoons occur on occasions in China, but it does change when and how each specific typhoon appears. The chaotic effect of the butterfly occurs within the complex system of world weather. The basic characteristic of such systems is that they are so complex and consist of so many agents with such complex interactions that even if the original state of the system were known in the greatest detail, it would still be

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impossible to calculate their exact behaviour within any reasonable timeframe, even using the most powerful supercomputers imaginable.

Systems such as these are *non-linear*, and are not governed by simple linear causality such as A causes B which in turn causes C. Instead, in these systems, B is not only caused by A but also by X, Y and Z and does not only cause C but also D, E and F, which in turn also affect A, B and C and all the rest and so on. Confusing this may be, but that is precisely the point. The internal development of such a system soon becomes a hopeless jumble and impossible to make any sense of using simple linearity. As the number of connections between agents in the system grows, the complexity of the system grows exponentially. Trying to predict the behaviour of a complex system through exact calculations and linear causality would usually result in predictions that would only arrive long after, perhaps millions of years after, the events that they ‘predicted’. As a result, it would appear much more sensible to simply sit back and watch these events unfold. This is why, for example, weather forecasts can never be 100% accurate *even* if our information on the weather at a given time were complete. There simply isn’t enough computational power in the universe to achieve this.¹⁰

The alternative is to simulate a simplified version of the system, but any such simulation would necessarily be inaccurate and these inaccuracies would result in progressively more erroneous predictions. While computer models of complex systems can help us understand their general characteristics, such models do not represent exactly any ‘real world’ systems but are actually complex systems in their own right.

It has come to light that complex or non-linear systems come in different flavours. Basically, there are the two opposite poles of chaos and order. In a chaotic system, the agents are relatively free and collide and connect with each other in a disorganized and haphazard manner, the famous butterfly effect being a perfect example. Air molecules are relatively free and easily spread their effects far and wide. In chaotic systems, the effects of a single event (such as the butterfly’s wing-flapping) increase over time and space. The further we move from the event, the greater effect it has on the state of the system. Like rings on water, the effects gradually spread out from the source causing miniscule changes in the short term. However, the total effect is that after some years, the exact positioning of clouds, depressions and other meteorological phenomena all over the earth’s atmosphere are completely different than if the butterfly hadn’t flapped its proverbial wings. The wing-flapping in itself does not

change anything in how the system works in general but, over time, it completely alters its exact contents.

At the other end of the spectrum are the ordered systems. An example of these would be a block of ice in which water molecules are in fixed positions in relation to each other and therefore can only directly affect a few nearby molecules. A blow to the side of the block certainly does cause vibrations among the molecules and they do reverberate in a complex way throughout the system. However, in this case, the effects of the event diminish over time and space until they eventually disappear. After a few seconds, the ice block is almost exactly as it was before and no continuous changes persist to alter its state. This is the opposite of the chaos effect, an ordered system in which the effects of events do not expand over time and space but contract, diminish and disappear.

The systems outlined above are two opposites, but in between them we find the most interesting complex systems of them all. They are usually referred to as 'complex adaptive systems' and in them, cause and effect exist in a certain equilibrium. While a single event does not typically alter the entire contents of the system, neither does it wither away into nothingness. In such systems, the effects of an event are often comparable to the event itself and usually form parts of ongoing causal chains that interact with each other and provide much of the dynamism inherent in these systems. They exist on the border of chaos and order in the sense that they have a chaotic element, but also a degree of order. While the chaotic water vapour in a cloud or the perfect order of a block of ice do not represent such a system, the biological world is filled with them. In fact it could be said that life and complex adaptive systems are largely synonymous. Most or all complex adaptive systems are biological in some sense, being either made up of organic matter (molecules or organisms) or created by organic beings such as ourselves. These systems are habitually self-regulating and show a remarkable ability to adapt, evolve or even to learn, and often do so through a type of competition.

For example, *neural network* computers are complex adaptive systems in their own right, simulating the basic components of the human (or animal) brain which are made up of a multitude of neurons and axons through which they connect. Such neural networks are used for many tasks, such as face recognition, to which traditional computers are ill suited. Because recognising a face requires an awareness of the overall picture rather than sticking to minute details that can be altered by perspective, facial expression or light, the linear causality of traditional programming is not well suited to this task. The neural network, conversely, can become quite good at it, but

requires a period of training during which it rearranges its internal pathways in response to feedback indicating success or failure. During this training, a variety of pathways are tried and evaluated. Some are discarded, but others are retained, mutated and improved. In this case, the network's pathways can be said to compete for success in recognizing faces. This is quite similar to what happens in the biological world, in which 'good' solutions multiply but 'bad' ones go extinct. In the former case the quality of the solution is evaluated by its success in recognizing faces but in the latter by its ability to reproduce effectively. In both cases there is a feedback that results in a selection in which the 'good' (the selected) is distinguished from the 'bad' (the discarded).

'Good' and 'bad' are not the best terms to use in this context, however, and it would be better to use the more neutral terms *adaptive* and *maladaptive*. There is no destiny involved here, no metaphysical progress or inherent quality. In the given circumstances, some solutions are simply selected and others are not. In his novel *Galapagos*, Kurt Vonnegut postulated a future in which special circumstances selected small brains for the few humans who survived. They had become amphibious creatures with flippers and fur that lived on fish and had no need for large brains in their simple lives. As brains were costly to maintain, having an unnecessarily large one became maladaptive and brains therefore became progressively smaller over a million years of evolution.¹¹ Selection, whether natural or other, produces solutions that work given the selective pressure. These solutions do not necessarily produce bigger, stronger or cleverer individuals.¹² Rather, they are all about adapting to each situation, and complex adaptive systems are nothing if not adaptable. This adaptability also explains how common they are. Because they change and evolve to fit the situation, they survive and multiply in volatile situations in which few things are permanent.

An excellent example of a complex adaptive system is the modern economy. It readily adapts – through competition, cooperation, supply and demand and other mechanisms – to changing conditions. It evolves and develops, and seems to have a life of its own. But, as has already been noted, the economy is only a subset of human society and it follows that society as a whole, is also a complex adaptive system. In fact, the whole history of human societies can be viewed in this light. Human societies all display the basic characteristics of complex adaptive systems. They are neither totally chaotic nor totally ordered but are rather a bit of both. They are flexible, adaptive and gradually change and evolve. The competition within human societies does not have to be of the dog-eat-dog variety, as postulated by the

Social Darwinists.¹³ On the contrary, it appears that a certain willingness to cooperate, albeit not at all costs, is in fact a competitive quality in human society. Two or more agents, individuals, companies or groups can improve their chances of survival by cooperating honestly with others as has been shown in an important study by Robert Axelrod.

Founded in game theory, Axelrod's experiment is concerned with the 'prisoner's dilemma', the question of whether two partners in crime should cooperate with each other rather than defect – 'squeal' – to the police. The best result for each is if one defects and the other doesn't. Some benefits are received if both cooperate but if both defect, both will suffer. The standard 'correct' answer to this dilemma is that one should defect since this brings the best chance of the greatest benefit. The prisoner's dilemma is not really about crime and punishment but rather about the nature, cost and benefit of cooperation. In his experiment, Axelrod organized an 'iterated prisoner's dilemma' competition that made this particularly clear. The prisoner's dilemma was not just played once but over and over again and each player had the ability to recognize other players and tailor behaviour towards them based on previous experience. This version of the prisoner's dilemma more accurately reflects real situations of cooperation in human society. A substantial number of computer programmes designed to make the most of the situation were entered into the competition. Twice in a row, the winner was the simplest programme of them all. Named appropriately 'Tit-for-Tat', it prescribed that the player should always begin by cooperating, but after that simply copied the other player's move the next time they met. In other words, if programme X cooperated in the first round, Tit-for-Tat would cooperate the next time they met but defect if X had defected in the first round. The main conclusion of the experiment is that it can indeed pay to cooperate honestly and defection has to be punished or others will take advantage of you. But punishment does not last forever. If X defected in the first round it will indeed be punished but if the player then 'repents' and begins cooperating, Tit-for-Tat will 'forgive' its earlier transgressions. Far more than just a game, these basic principles seem to be surprisingly universal for cooperation in complex systems without effective central control, such as a state.¹⁴

All life-forms are complex adaptive systems, from the smallest single-cell organism made up of a complex soup of chemicals to the blue whale and giant sequoia, the largest animal and plant on earth. All the earliest life-forms were made up of solitary cells living life on their own but many of them eventually discovered the advantages of

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cooperation and began to gather in groups and colonies that worked together for protection and feeding. These groups often formed complex adaptive systems of their own and even evolved into multi-cellular organisms such as ourselves that have become so closely integrated that our constituent cells are no longer able to live outside the system. Therefore, complex adaptive systems have a tendency, or at least the ability, to form a hierarchy in which many smaller systems, such as cells, band together as agents in another larger system, such as a human being. Consequently, multi-cellular organisms are complex adaptive systems made up of many smaller complex adaptive systems. But that is not where it ends. A number of multicellular organisms can form a society of one sort or another and this society then becomes yet another complex adaptive system, another level in the hierarchy of such systems.¹⁵ An ant colony is an excellent example of such a society in which the integration of the agents (individual ants) has gone much further than in a human society, to the extent that they have lost most of their individuality and are easily sacrificed for the good of the whole. As Douglas F. Hofstadter has shown, the ant colony in this case has become so well integrated that it can be said to constitute a life-form in its own right – a complex adaptive system made up of lower level agents (ants) which in turn are made up of still lower level agents (body cells) all of which are complex adaptive systems.¹⁶

‘The whole is more than the sum of its parts,’ is a common expression that in complexity theory is demonstrated by the idea of *emergence*, which is perhaps its most important contribution to the social sciences, as suggested by J.S. Lansing. Emergence is “the idea that complex global patterns with new properties may emerge from local interactions”¹⁷ The emerging order that results from the interactions of the agents or ‘order for free’, as Stuart Kauffman puts it, displays properties that are not inherent to the agents but emerge only through their interaction in a complex system.¹⁸

A human polity is such an emergent phenomenon and, because of it, has a certain Frankensteinian quality. Initially put together by ordinary mortals, each seeking their own goals, it then becomes an entity in its own right. It *emerges*. It *lives*! Polities have a tendency to develop their own set of interests and priorities that are more than just the sum of the interests and priorities of its constituent population. In the terms used by Dawkins, they are the survival machines that exist for the benefit of their memes, not for the benefit of their human population, and their interests are particularly those of self-preservation. After all, a polity that has developed some mechanisms for protecting itself and its memes against internal and

external dangers is more likely to survive than one that has not. It is a matter of 'natural' selection. In fact, it is entirely possible that the polity develops interests that are not only independent of those of its human population, but actually opposed to the individual interests of the majority of its members. In such a case, the majority of the population would be better off without the polity but the polity still struggles to survive. Many oppressive dictatorships, past and present, would exemplify this. From the polity's point of view it does not exist for the good of the people but rather the other way round. The people exist for the good of the polity and its memes in rather the same way as the cells of our bodies that, from our point of view, exist for *our* good and that of our genes. We do not exist to ensure the well-being of our body cells! Hofstadter's ant colony is perhaps a demonstration of what can happen when the interests of individuals become completely subservient to the interests of the whole and their common genes. Of course, this has happened many times in the history of life on Earth and occurred because, in many cases, the whole stood a better chance of survival than the individuals on their own and not because the individuals liked it.

Even if we do not live in anthills where we would lose our individuality, we all live in societies and are thus agents in complex adaptive systems. The interaction within human society is extremely complex and involves competition, cooperation, the exchange of valuables, force, family relationships and a host of other variables. That human societies are complex adaptive systems is rather clear, but what is perhaps not as obvious is that a number of societies, states, tribes or other polities, can form a complex adaptive system of their own, yet another level in the hierarchy of such systems.

In a biological hierarchy of complex adaptive systems, the general rule seems to be that the higher we go in the hierarchy the more competitive the systems become, whereas the lower levels have developed cooperation between agents to the point of erasing their individuality. Barring illnesses such as cancer, the cells and organs of our bodies are totally cooperative.¹⁹ As individuals in a society we display both cooperation and competition and a system of such societies is primarily competitive, a *competitive system*. This may mean that as these systems come into being they are often very competitive, but as they mature they frequently develop cooperative behaviour, stimulated by competition at a higher level in the hierarchy. Lower level cooperation often becomes beneficial because it enhances success at the higher level competition. A number of agents – cells, ants, people – band together and in this way often become more successful collectively than they would have been individually

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and in the process add another level to the hierarchy. The summit of such hierarchies – the top level complex adaptive system – perhaps tends to remain competitive more than cooperative, since this system as a whole is not actively engaged in external competition with other like systems. From here on, we will use the term *competitive system* for complex adaptive systems made up of human polities that actively compete with each other.

Complex adaptive systems in which agents compete are perhaps more dynamic and more adaptable than those where cooperation between agents is universal. As individuals we are in some ways able to adapt both physically and mentally to our environment, but this adaptability is very limited compared to the adaptability of human society as a whole. It is society, with its acquired knowledge, technology and stored information that has allowed us to colonize deserts, the arctic and even reach the moon. The last of these was only accomplished as a direct consequence of fierce competition between two states, the USA and the USSR. Our limited physical adaptability would, by itself, never allow us to survive in these environments. But even our physical adaptability only exists because of external stimulation. A species living in a perfectly stable environment would not need to adapt to environmental changes and might gradually lose its ability to do so. A complex adaptive system that has become totally cooperative will show little dynamism except through external stimulation, i.e. competition in some shape or form. Conversely, a system that is largely competitive will display such dynamism even without external stimulation, and that is why competitive systems of polities usually show much more vigour, adaptability and change than single, isolated polities.

Whether these systems are primarily cooperative or competitive, their agents all communicate and exchange information in basically the same way. It may seem odd to speak of competition as a way of communication in the same sense as, for example, the neurons in our brains communicate and exchange information, but from the point of view of complex adaptive systems it makes perfect sense. When one agent shows aggression to another it is sending a communication to which the second one must respond in some way. If the first is a predator and the second a prey, the latter must either defend itself or run away. If we are dealing with two states, the latter can respond to the first's aggression by copying, for example, its military style, in which case real information has been communicated. But even in a competitive system, cooperation also develops. In the modern world, most inter-state relations are fortunately of a peaceful nature, even if competition is an underlying factor.

There are about 200 independent states in the modern world. With our global economy and communication systems, all of these states can interact with each other in a number of different ways; politically, socially, economically or ideologically. Even today this interaction is largely competitive and the world system changes and evolves accordingly. The general rule is that competition encourages innovation, then sorts out adaptive solutions and multiplies them. Thus, the state system of the modern world is a complex adaptive system and we should consequently expect it to quicken the pace of change and evolution in the world. But while the modern state system is a single, worldwide competitive system (see chapter 9) this is a rather new development.

Early societies, especially those of hunter-gatherers, were often so small, simple and loosely organized that they could hardly qualify as acting agents in a competitive system. In such cases, even if there were a number of bands within reach of each other, no competitive system emerged. Once larger and more complex societies arose, especially after the development of farming, the possibility for competitive systems also appeared. Despite this, fully developed competitive systems were still not very common, in many cases because of isolation or distances that ruled out active competition, or a great power arose and eliminated the competition. This was generally the case in China and it also occurred in the West under the Roman Empire. But when competitive systems emerged, rapid development usually followed. For us, the most pertinent example of this is the European state system in the medieval and modern periods, which undoubtedly played a large part in giving the European powers the great advantages that allowed them to dominate the world (see chapter 9).²⁰ While I am certainly not the first to suggest that the European state system was instrumental in accelerating the development of that continent, I would like to place this in a much broader perspective and acknowledge several other instances of fast or dynamic development in connection with competitive systems. These are not only state systems but also barbarian ones, and some of them will be discussed later in this book.²¹

The varied systems of states or other polities that enhanced competition and development apparently came into being in different ways. However, in the present context, the details of how they appeared are not very important and did not usually affect their nature. The conditions that facilitated the emergence of competitive systems are discussed in each case below, and an attempt to classify them is made in the overview. Once we accept that these systems materialize in many different ways, we do not need to understand

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their origins in order to understand their nature, but there is one important exception to this – the *periphery system* (type 2 in the overview, chapter 10).

Occasionally a great power existed in proximity to several much smaller and often fundamentally different societies. These smaller societies could then form a competitive system *against* the empire. The difference in size and power was such that the smaller societies had to go to extremes in order to be able to compete with the empire and in the process often also competed among themselves. The prime example of this is the Germanic barbarians vs. the Roman Empire (chapter 6), but other possibilities are the Urnfield phenomenon (chapter 2) and the Gallic polities on the eve of their expansion (chapter 4). Apart from the distinction between barbarian and state systems (below), this is the only important ‘type’ or variation on the competitive systems theme, since it involves the continued presence of an empire that fundamentally affects how the system works after it has emerged. In most other cases, how the systems originate has little effect on how they function.

In the pre-modern world, competition between states or other polities was mostly military. Diplomacy, prestige, trade and wealth also counted for something but were usually of little value in competition unless backed up by physical force. War is the highest form of competition, and as a result, the discussion of competition in this book focuses largely on war and military capabilities.

War

Throughout human history, the competition between societies has more often than not been primarily expressed through war. Human history is largely about power in its various forms and warfare is the ultimate expression of power, not by the individual but by whole polities or societies as they clash and collide. For societies that live in competitive environments, especially in competitive systems, war decides between the societal forms that survive and those that become extinct and, in this way, tends to determine the course of social evolution within such systems. Only societies that have a socio-political structure that allow them to effectively defend themselves can survive.

Instead of concentrating only on internal social developments, as classic social history tends to do, I maintain that these have to be considered in the context of competition and survival of whole societies, polities or states.²² Internal social developments are

certainly important and can by themselves determine the course of history in isolated societies. However, once a society is placed in a competitive situation its first concern is survival and only societies whose structure allows them to compete effectively can survive.

This approach is partly a way of adapting biological Darwinism to the study of history.²³ In the biological world, species change and evolve in accordance with how well adapted they are to their environment. Those that cannot adjust to changing circumstances are doomed to extinction but those that can, prosper, multiply and beget new species. This is the driving force of biological evolution and I suggest that the exact same principle applies to the evolution of human societies. This is not to say that history is all about wars and conflict between states and societies any more than biology is all about survival. The anatomy or internal structure of a living organism is of the greatest importance in biology, as should be the study of internal social structures in history. But these cannot be considered in isolation when we are looking at long term developments. In the end, it is self evident that the only organisms and societies that are able to survive and multiply are those that have internal structures that enable survival under the specific conditions with which they have to deal.

Social historians often assume that social evolution is driven by internal social mechanisms. This is only partially true, since external pressure is often the ultimate cause of social change and without such pressure, human societies can sometimes remain little changed for hundreds or even thousands of years. It is no coincidence that isolated communities often appear to have remained the same for a long time. This is not just a reflection of their limited access to new ideas and technologies but also of the fact that, without external pressure and competition, they don't feel the need for change.

Wars, however cruel or immoral they may be, are such a crucial part of human history that they must not be ignored. Politics in competitive environments were constantly forced to maximize their military capabilities and this could have a profound effect on their socio-political structure and, indeed, entire history.

Hollywood sometimes chances upon a subject that is historically important. The 2003 motion picture, *The Last Samurai*, set in 19th century Japan, is an example of this. In a roundabout, semi-fictional way it deals with the clash between two different modes of warfare.

On the one hand there is *elite warfare*, in this case represented by the old samurai class. The samurai were an excellent example of a *warrior elite*, a social class specializing in warfare and martial arts. By their effective and costly equipment and by making war their

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profession, they achieved a high level of proficiency, far beyond that which could be attained by non-professionals such as peasants, merchants and others who had to work for a living. A warrior elite, such as the Japanese samurai, was normally the ruling class or, at least, formed a part of it, and justified its social position and power by claiming to defend society against external attack and internal disruption. At the same time, the warrior elite safeguarded its own position by prowess in arms, often actively discouraging 'commoners' from bearing arms or practising their use as this could pose a serious threat. Warrior elite armies were often highly efficient and could destroy much larger armies made up of amateurs and part-timers. Consequently, in societies dominated by warrior elites at the height of their power, lower class uprisings usually had a very slim chance of success.

In *The Last Samurai*, the old warrior elite, or rather a conservative and traditionalist part of it, refused to acknowledge the profound social changes that were taking place and clung to its old values of honour, service and uncompromising bravery, even to the point of declining to use firearms. For this they were ready to pay the ultimate price when they came up against the imperial army equipped with muskets, howitzers and machine-guns. The Imperial Army, in the film, represents the mode of warfare directly opposite to that of the samurais: *mass warfare*.

Of course, the downside of elite warfare is that only a small minority of the general population can participate in it and it leaves the great majority of able-bodied men as either non-combatants or in a supporting role. It thus makes little use of a large reserve of people that could potentially make up a formidable military force. Mass warfare is a mode of war that seeks to take advantage of this reserve by mobilizing a large number of commoners and providing them with cheap but effective weapons, thereby producing armies that are much larger than those of the warrior elites. It doesn't matter if the individual soldiers in such armies are no match for the elite warriors. What they lack in skill they make up for in numbers, and *The Last Samurai* illustrates this beautifully. In the end, the samurais' lifetime of practice and study is no match for the imperial army with its superior numbers, a few months of training, and modern weapons.

Mass warfare is a term used here for the type of military practice characterized by relatively large armies equipped with more or less standardized equipment for each soldier or warrior, that is efficient but not over-elaborate. Such equipment is basically simple to produce and use and not very costly, so that whether it was provided by the government or by the warriors themselves the polity can afford to

keep a much larger force of such warriors than that of a true warrior elite with its highly specialized training and expensive armament. At the same time, the development of the equipment for mass warfare goes hand in hand with the development of the appropriate tactics for such forces.

An important variant of mass warfare is what I call *popular warfare*. In these cases, the equipment and tactics developed for mass warfare are adapted to and used by the general population or, at least, an important part of it consisting not of professional soldiers but farmers or other commoners performing a dual service as warriors. Arms are often supplied by the men themselves and there can be different grades of warriors according to their equipment. Such popular armies signify the maximization of military power, often employing every usable man in a *citizen militia* such as that which characterized ancient Greece (see chapter 3). Popular armies constitute *the people under arms*, which invariably has important political consequences and plays a crucial role in the expansion cycles discussed below.

These terms, *elite warfare*, *mass warfare* and the latter's variant, *popular warfare*, are created solely for use in this investigation.²⁴ They are tools tailored for the task at hand, and it is by no means implied that they reflect the most fundamental classification of warfare in general but are simply a useful categorization for our purposes. War in history has rarely been waged with pure forms of either elite or mass warfare. Usually, one is dominant but not to the exclusion of the other and the history of war can be presented as a dichotomy between these two modes of warfare. Constant competition has ensured that the modes of warfare are continually changing and developing through tactics, technology and social change.

Violence has been a part of human history for as long as we can determine, and war – organized violence – seems to have existed since long before written history began. Already in the Neolithic Age – the later Stone Age when the introduction of farming had enabled the growth of much larger and more complex societies than that of the early hunter-gatherers – we find clear evidence of armed conflicts between groups of people, both through cave paintings and gruesome finds such as human skulls embedded with arrow points.²⁵

For a long time warfare must have been relatively simple. The weapons used were bows and arrows and a variety of clubs or stone axes. Implements that could also function as tools, these were simple, cheap and available to most people. This sort of weaponry was not difficult to obtain and could hardly facilitate the formation of warrior elites. Specialized tactics and weapons had not yet appeared, and any

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group of people wishing to elevate itself and become an elite would have had to use means other than brute force. During this time, elites certainly appeared but they seem to have relied on cults and rituals to maintain their position rather than the force of arms.

Not much is known about early warfare but it seems that the development of bronze metallurgy from around 3000 BC played a large part in establishing the first warrior elites. It was only with the development of metallurgy that specialized weapons appeared and warrior elites began appearing in Europe shortly after 2000 BC.²⁶ Bronze was never cheap but could be made into effective weapons and armour, so making those who could afford it more effective in armed conflict. Because of its cost, bronze could rarely be used for weaponry except by a small number of people in each community. Horse-drawn chariots and composite bows were also new and expensive tools for war introduced in the Bronze Age, but were only available to the few that could afford them.²⁷ This small number of people could, through the use of their arms and wealth, increase their influence and transform themselves into a warrior elite. This new elite did not have to rely as much on ritual as the earlier one, but could use its arms to defend its position and justify it by the protection they provided to the community. This we can term an internal formation of a warrior elite, but an external formation was no less possible when an invading group of warriors installed itself as a new elite. With the formation of a centralized state, the elite, regardless of how it was formed, could even give up bearing arms altogether and instead rely on a professional force of paid soldiers maintained by the state.

Barbarism and Civilization

Set among the Belgian resistance during World War II, the British television comedy *'Allo, 'Allo*, portrayed English pilots as incredibly stupid and speaking a completely unintelligible language represented by repeated utterances of 'far, far' (with an upper-crust accent). This is what English supposedly sounded like in Belgian ears, and it wouldn't have been surprising then if the locals had ended up calling the English the 'Farfarians'.

To the ancient Greeks, the unintelligible babbling of foreigners sounded more like 'bar, bar' and they consequently got into the habit of calling them 'barbarians'. For the Greeks, a barbarian was any foreigner (i.e. non-Greek) irrespective of culture and the term was not least used of their archenemies, the Persians, who were anything but barbarians according to the modern usage of the term.²⁸ Even so, the

word carried derogatory overtones, perhaps not surprisingly given the rather chauvinistic attitude of many ancient Greeks. Gradually, however, the meaning shifted and came to denote in particular the uncivilized neighbours of the Greeks and Romans. Ever since antiquity the term 'barbarian' has carried with it the image of a large, hairy alcoholic, brandishing a battle-axe and cleaving skulls. For civilized human beings, this is not acceptable behaviour and so the barbarians are, as a rule, not particularly highly regarded.

Along with the purely derogatory meaning of the word there is another more neutral one. The Romans applied it indiscriminately to people who had their origins outside of civilized society. Something of a catch-all term, this meant almost everyone from outside the Roman Empire, especially those Europeans living beyond its limits.²⁹ Although the Romans despised the barbarians in general, it was accepted that even barbarians could become civilized, mostly through the efforts of Rome. Occasionally, Roman writers, such as the historian Tacitus, who wrote a book about the Germanic barbarians that appeared in 98 AD, even used the concept of the pure, primitive (and non-alcoholic) barbarian to urge their fellow Romans to abandon the excesses of civilized decadence.

In modern times, many scholars have begun to use the term as a neutral description for a certain kind of society exemplified by those of ancient Europe outside the circle of Mediterranean civilization.³⁰ As such, the term has been used extensively by historians who have tried, with some success, to deprive it of its deprecating connotations. All historians who study late antiquity use the term freely and most of them without prejudice. Other scholars who have had to deal with 'barbarian' societies have often shied away from using the term, probably from the common misconception that changing a term somehow stops prejudice. Anthropologists, archaeologists and others often use instead terms like *tribal societies*, *chiefdoms* and *primitive societies*, the last-named, somewhat surprisingly, being supposed to be less derogatory than *barbarians*. To be fair though, these terms often denote various different kinds of barbarian societies. However, following a good old historical tradition I shall continue to use the terms *barbarians* and *barbarian society* mostly because they have more character than the aforementioned bloodless concoctions. No negative disposition is indicated by this usage.

In this book, the term *barbarian* is used to describe the population of any farming society not organized into states. As soon as statehood is developed, the barbarians become *civilized*. It thus follows that all agrarian societies are either barbarian or civilized, if we ignore those pesky ones that can't seem to make up their minds. The advantage of

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this terminology is that it provides an easily understood distinction between barbarism and civilization that is not dependent on subjective evaluation of the 'quality' of each society. Civilization is neither 'better' nor more 'advanced' than barbarism; it is just different.

However, barbarism and ancient civilizations also had a lot in common. Both based their subsistence on farming and more than 90% of the population of either was usually directly involved in working the land. These agricultural societies, barbarian and civilized, were thus profoundly different from the societies of hunter-gatherers and from our modern industrial societies.

The hunter-gatherer way of life is the oldest one in the human race and the term is applied to societies whose members do not actively produce their own food but rather hunt, gather and fish for the nourishment they consume. All human beings lived in hunter-gatherer societies until about 10,000-12,000 years ago, when the development of agriculture began in the Near East, but societies of this type later arose independently in several other places. The first *farmers*³¹ can thus also be called the first barbarians since organized civilizations only arose about five thousand years ago, also in the Near East. In the meantime, farming had spread to Europe, first arriving in the Balkan Peninsula around 7,000 BC and reaching Central Europe by about 6,000 BC. Farming also arrived independently by sea throughout the Mediterranean and gradually became the dominant way of life in most of Europe. Only in the far north and northeast, in areas ill-suited to agriculture, did hunting and gathering survive as a significant way of life. This was the Genesis of European barbarism and it brought a profound revolution to the continent, paving the way for unprecedented population growth, the development of professional trade networks, new ideologies, the rise of elites and class distinctions, and, eventually, the state.³²

Applying the term barbarism to six or seven thousand years of history hides the fact that profound changes were taking place during this time, and these societies present a great variety of social, political and economic development. However, it is not the purpose of this book to serve as a guide to European prehistory. Suffice to say, while the Mediterranean civilizations of Greece and Rome were rising in the south, most of Northern Europe was inhabited by barbarian farmers. These communities based their subsistence on animal husbandry and agriculture and most people lived in small villages or hamlets. Social stratification varied between them, but at least some lived in relatively egalitarian societies. Some groups had kings but others

apparently operated as aristocratic or even democratic republics. There were few cities or towns outside the Mediterranean, although some power centres could attract considerable populations.

In this book, the term barbarian is usually reserved for the settled barbarians of the north, but there were others. These were the pastoral nomads of the Central Eurasian steppes whose origins can be sought back to the 4th millennium BC when a mixture of farmers and local hunter-gatherers colonized the Ukrainian and Russian steppe as mobile pastoralists, later spreading into Central Asia.³³ Their new lifestyle involved an increased dependence on movable livestock such as cattle, goats and sheep, but placed less emphasis on pigs and growing grain, which led to the eventual abandonment of both. The invention of the wheel, which may have occurred in this region in the 4th millennium BC, ensured the mobility so vital to people who utilized the dry grasslands with their sparse and seasonal vegetation. This is also the region in which horses were first domesticated. Initially they were probably used primarily for food and as beasts of burden, early breeds being ill-suited to riding or pulling heavy carts, for which oxen were used.

It was only around 1000 BC that the steppe peoples reached their full potential as horseback conquerors of their more sedentary neighbours.³⁴ This was facilitated not only by their mobile lifestyle, but also by a new and larger breed of horses better adapted to carrying a rider, along with a variety of improvements in their riding tack, such as the two-joint bits more suited to riding than traction. From this point onwards, nomadic warriors of the steppes became a constant threat to the organized civilizations of Eurasia. Again and again they appeared out of the blue to wreck havoc, plundering, conquering or exacting tribute all around the periphery of the steppes. Cimmerians, Scythians, Sarmatians, Huns, Turks and Mongols are just some of the better known of these attackers and everywhere they went, civilization was put severely to the test.

As already mentioned, I place the dividing line between barbarism and civilization at the development of statehood. Many scholars use a basic tripartite division of human societies into hunter-gather, agrarian and industrial societies, terms derived from their principal mean of making a living. These are separated by the two great 'revolutions': the Neolithic (invention of farming) and the industrial.³⁵ The basic division between barbarians and hunter-gatherers mentioned above falls neatly into this tradition. If we now combine the distinction between state and non-state societies and the tripartite system we come up with a scheme that looks something like this:

	Non-State Societies	State-Societies
Hunter-Gatherers	Hunter-Gatherers (all)	[none] ³⁶
Agrarian Societies	Barbarism	Civilization
Industrial Societies	[none]	Civilization

As we can see, hunter-gatherers are never organised into states, whereas industrial societies always are. Only agrarian societies can either have states or not. Consequently, civilizations can either be agrarian or industrial, whereas barbarism is always agrarian. Since the distinction between barbarism and civilization as defined here is simply the absence or presence of a state organization, this should act as a warning against overemphasising the difference between the two. Agrarian civilizations and barbarians did not belong to different realities that had nothing in common. In fact most of their material culture was often common to both when they were living in close proximity. The divergence is basically one of organization, but with better organization some other things follow. For example, states are much more likely to build large towns and cities, they often facilitate trade by guaranteeing internal peace and security, and habitually devise or adopt some system of writing.

The basic political unit in non-state societies is usually called a tribe, but scholars differ on how to describe it more precisely.³⁷ This is perhaps just as well as there is no reason to believe that societies that only shared the *absence* of a state organization should necessarily have much else in common. Many tribes were also parts of larger cultural communities characterized not only by a similar material culture and way of life but also by similar ideologies, belief systems and even political organization. These *cultures* were held together by a network of exchange between neighbours involving not only objects but also ideas and people facilitated, for example, through marriage. In many, perhaps most, cases, these cultures must have been held together by a common language or set of mutually intelligible dialects. It stands to reason that people will find it easier to have a relationship with someone speaking the same language rather than with one who babbles in a foreign tongue.³⁸

We know of several such cultural communities dating from historical times, and some earlier ones can be reconstructed with

varying degrees of certainty from the archaeological record. Well-known examples are the Gauls (or Celts), Germans and Slavs, all of whom were prominent in the 1st millennium BC or AD and are still important in the identities of various European populations. There were certainly many others at different times in European prehistory but most disappeared at various times through migration and assimilation. A few still survive as ethnic entities, such as the Balts, who now have their independent states in Latvia and Lithuania.

Using Dawkins' *meme* terminology, we can perhaps define a culture as a group of humans who share a significant number of important memes not shared by other neighbouring groups. As such, they are not confined to prehistory but apply to any human society. Such cultures are not political organizations and, therefore, cannot act as effective competitive units. Cultures do not take deliberate actions, compete for space or precedence nor make wars. Only polities can do this. By definition, polities are precisely groups that can act in this way. They are competitive units. Of course, a culture and a polity can sometimes be broadly identical, such as the culture of Greco-Roman antiquity, which in the early centuries AD included almost the same population and territories as the Roman state. A polity can sometimes include more than one culture, although this is often a transient situation before the polity either breaks up or moulds its cultures into one, as happened during Roman expansion.

It is quite common for a culture to include many polities and when this occurs, interesting things often follow. In such situations, the constituent polities often begin competing fiercely among themselves. As they are very similar to each other and share most of their memes, each new competitive innovation, such as more effective weaponry, will only give the inventor a limited advantage since it is easily emulated by all his competitors. This makes competition all the more urgent. A single polity is never able to gain a significant permanent advantage, as competitors are always barking at its heels and it has to constantly innovate and emulate merely to stay abreast of the competition. A culture with many actively competing polities is what I have termed a *competitive system* and when these emerge, things tend to move along very quickly.³⁹

While competitive systems are one of two central themes of this book, I am by no means the first to discover them. The idea behind them is usually expressed as *state systems*, of which authors such as Robert Wesson⁴⁰ or Charles Tilly⁴¹ have written extensively. However, the original idea was perhaps first proposed by no less a figure than Montesquieu.⁴² These systems are considered unusually dynamic and evolve quickly due to competition between the states

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within them as exemplified by the city-states of ancient Greece (ca. 700 – 300 BC) or the nation-states of early modern Europe (ca. 1500 – 1800 AD).⁴³ Some archaeologists have also applied a similar basic idea not only to various early states but also to non-state polities, both historic and prehistoric, although they have a tendency to de-emphasise competition in favour of a more general *peer polity interaction*.⁴⁴ As the concept is applied in this book, a competitive system can either be composed of states or the stateless societies of barbarians. Therefore, the term *state system* is inappropriate for our purposes except as a subset, and has been replaced by *competitive system*. However, this book is not about competitive systems in general, but how they relate to its second theme, *expansion cycles*, which, as far as I know, is a completely novel idea. It is an attempt to explain some of the phenomenal expansions that occurred in European history but also has relevance to other parts of the world. As most expansion cycles are actually produced by competitive systems, the two themes connect closely.

Expansion cycles have some distinct social, political and military characteristics (see p. 85) but their most spectacular trait is that they all involve some type of migration. Migrations can take place peacefully, as occurs when one population slowly infiltrates another. Such cases usually involve the migration of individuals and families on their own and not as a part of a larger political unit or any type of conquest. However, these are not the migrations with which we are principally dealing. Rather, our concern lies mainly with those episodes in which an entire population left its homeland and forcefully took possession of a new territory as a political body.⁴⁵

Migrations were often cited by early archaeologists of prehistory as convenient explanations for cultural changes for which they otherwise found difficult to account. If there was a fundamental alteration in pottery styles, burial customs or settlement patterns it was assumed that the population had changed, and this had to be the result of some sort of migration. This kind of explanation was all too convenient, and there is no doubt that many early scholars went too far in employing it. Of course, there was ultimately a reaction against this *migrationist* position and since around 1970 the prevailing attitude in archaeology has been to explain such changes either in terms of the diffusion of ideas and technology or by local evolution and internal changes. Even when a migration is known from the historical record it is often difficult to discern archaeologically, as it does not necessarily leave much evidence in the ground, especially if the immigrating population is similar to the indigenous one in physique and culture.⁴⁶ The current trend is to use migration only as a last

resort. It has almost become a dirty word to many archaeologists, and for a time was rarely used except in contexts of denial or even ridicule.⁴⁷

This reaction against migrationism was healthy and cleansing for archaeology and the historical sciences as a whole. However, as often happens when the pendulum swings, it went too far. In the thousand years between around 400 BC and 600 AD Europe saw some spectacular and historically well-attested migrations. During this time, the ethnic map of the continent was substantially redrawn, not once or twice but four times in all. Gauls, Romans, Germans and Slavs all put their mark on Europe, and each time this was done through migrations. Only in the Roman case was there another significant factor – political domination. All the rest were fairly typical barbarian migrations. Before all this began, probably less than 10% of all Europeans spoke languages ancestral to Latin, Germanic or Slavic. Modern ethnicities, however, were founded during these episodes and about 95% of the peoples of Europe now speak languages descended from these three groups. Cumulatively, their effects have been such that they have almost totally erased the ethnic effect of the first, or Gallic, expansion. Given the effects that migrations have had in historical times, it seems ludicrous to the historian to deny the possibility that something similar might have happened in prehistory.

Since around 1990, however, there has been a certain trend among archaeologists to rehabilitate migrations as an important element in explaining changes in human societies, and they have slowly been making their way back into mainstream archaeology, even if they still have some way to go.⁴⁸ With the narrative sources staring them in the face, however, historians never had the option of denying them. But even for historians, the mood swings in archaeology are important because now that the pendulum is starting to swing back, the old migrationist assumptions are no longer acceptable. We can no longer use migrations as a default explanation of change, some kind of *deus ex machina* to be conjured up when we don't know what else to do. Migrations are complex phenomena and they need to be explained.

As a result, we have to try to understand why large scale migrations occurred and, if possible, find a common underlying cause or mechanism that is at work in several or all of these episodes that can explain why they repeatedly occurred. The problem with barbarian expansions is that the barbarians normally left no written records. Although we often acquire some insights from their civilized neighbours, they have their own perspective, usually limited and negative, and generally tell us little about what was actually

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happening in the barbarian homeland that caused them to expand so dramatically. This means that our knowledge is heavily dependent on archaeological remains from which it is difficult to extract reliable information on social developments, politics or even the migrations themselves.

Fortunately, not all of these expansions occurred in barbarian Europe. At least two of them, both originating in competitive systems, had civilized roots with enough written material to allow us to take a closer look. The first of these, the expansion of the ancient, or rather 'archaic', Greeks of the 8th to 6th centuries BC (ca. 700-500 BC), is particularly important (see chapter 3). For our purposes, it is more important than the second example, the modern European migrations that brought millions of people from their homelands to distant continents during the 19th and 20th centuries. The latter is, without doubt, the most spectacular expansion ever to occur in human history but it is so intricately attached to the modernization, industrialization and other processes that have revolutionized our world during the past two centuries, that it is difficult to discern where one ends and another begins. Consequently, the Greek example should be more typical for these expansions as they appeared in everyday agrarian societies.

If we can find common elements in both barbarian and civilized expansions, we may use them to construct a common model for such expansions. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between barbarism and civilization and that difference is statehood. Before we begin examining individual cases of expansion cycles, it is necessary to take a closer look at states.

States and Writing

What is a state and how does it differ from barbarian political organizations? All the societies discussed in this book did have some form of political organization, they were all *polities* in the sense that there was some political body claiming authority and capable of making concerted decisions. A state is clearly a better organized political unit than the normal barbarian polities, but what exactly is the difference? The most common definition used by social scientists today is the one devised by Max Weber and goes like this: "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory" [original emphasis].⁴⁹ Weber probably only intended this definition to cover the modern state for which it works very well (see chapter 9). But many

historians and anthropologists have tried to use it as a general definition, including pre-modern states as well. This is not appropriate and has caused some serious problems for scholars of the Middle Ages or Antiquity. The Norman kingdom in England, the medieval Republic of Venice, the Carolingian empire, the Roman Empire, the city-states of Athens and Sparta and the Persian Empire all had centralized governments that differed fundamentally from the less organized polities of the barbarians even if they did not conform to Weber's definition.

Few early states can be said to have successfully claimed the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force. Justice was often a more or less private affair and the state concentrated on collecting taxes, keeping the overall peace and external defence. Monopolizing physical force was not a prime concern for most early states and any definition based on this approach is, therefore, potentially misleading. Some historians have tried to modify Weber's definition to include early states but I think this is misguided since, even if states have *evolved* to claim a monopoly of physical force, this is not how they behaved when they first came into existence.⁵⁰ On the other hand, denying these early polities the status of statehood is hardly an option, since this would only leave us with the problem of finding a new term to describe them that would still distinguish them from barbarian polities. A much better approach is to use Weber's definition as it was originally intended, i.e. only as a specific definition of the modern state but not including all states in history.

States no doubt come into existence for many and varied reasons but they do have some structural characteristics that set them aside from barbarian polities, and I feel that a good working definition of state must somehow reflect this.⁵¹ I therefore propose the following: *A state is a form of centralized government where political authority is executed by proxy.*⁵² The ultimate owner of political authority is sometimes the people itself (as in democracies) but in early states was more often a king or a body of oligarchs or could be any of these together. Between the subjects and the recognized owner of political authority – which we can call a *sovereign* for short – there are middlemen, representatives or officials, often a whole hierarchy of them, which together constitute the state apparatus. In a more or less democratic state the 'people' are both at the top of the hierarchy (as the sovereign) and at the bottom (as subjects / citizens).⁵³

It is important to note that armed retainers, often kept by lords and chiefs, did not execute political authority and their presence didn't necessarily indicate a state, even if they were often instrumental in building one. Rather, they were an extension of the

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lord's *personal* power and usually bound to him by close personal ties and the strongest oaths. According to my definition, a ruler who only wields personal authority without some system of middlemen or officials is a leader in a barbarian polity but not a head of state. On the other hand, if a retainer was given a part of his lord's domain to administer on a more or less permanent basis, he could be considered to hold his lord's political authority by proxy and we would thereby have a state. Neither should we regard local lords or chiefs as such proxy-holders unless they were appointed by the overlord, could be removed by him and were responsible to him for their local administration. Resident strongmen who based their power on their own resources and local support cannot be regarded as part of a state's administration even if they paid allegiance to an overlord. Of course, in the real world there is sometimes little difference between the two and crossing over could be quite common as it was in medieval Europe, where the feudal ties between a king and his dukes or counts could be extremely variable. Sometimes the growing independence of local lords could even amount to the dissolution of the state into its constituent parts.

Barbarian polities did not have professional administrative systems. Policy decisions were sometimes made directly by an assembly of the people. Even if there were men charged with some official tasks, these were only intermittent activities except in the case of chiefs or other such societal leaders, who could sometimes be regarded as sovereigns. But as long as they wielded their power in person and without the help of an administrative system, there was no state. Of course, the line dividing states from stateless polities is a fine one and it is not always certain exactly where it lies. In many cases, we should imagine that states emerge gradually and without any clear break with the stateless past and should so be prepared to encounter many polities that seem to straddle the borderline.

Early states, except isolated ones, often spent half or more of their income from taxes and other sources, on defence.⁵⁴ In fact, defence was the primary role and justification for most states, in some cases to the point of excluding all else. Exceptions exist of course, such as the maintenance and running of the irrigation systems of Egypt and Mesopotamia, but defence and the military were fundamental conditions for the existence of most early states, without which they could not survive.

However, not all early states show the same structural characteristics, and although this is not the place to delve into the intricacies of early statehood, it may be helpful to divide them into

three rough categories: city-states, centralized states and feudal states.⁵⁵

City-states emerged with the first civilization in Sumer and subsequently in many other places. They were often the first form of states to emerge as in Greece, Italy or the Maya of Central America. As the name implies, they were small and based on the concentration of people and resources in a single city. In a world of city-states, the emergence of larger empires was most often the result of a single city-state's ability to assert its hegemony over its neighbours. Babylon, Assur, Sparta, Athens, Carthage and Rome all began that way.

The larger states, however they appeared, showed varying degrees of centralization. A highly centralized state like the Roman Empire held tight control over all its territory and its main source of coercive power, necessary for holding the empire together, was a professional standing army directly under the command of the central government. Most modern states show the same characteristics, even if they are far more complex and powerful than the centralized states of past agrarian societies.

Feudal states or decentralized states are at the other end of the spectrum. The term does not pertain specifically to medieval Europe, although the form is best known from there.⁵⁶ Here, it is used as a generalized concept covering a variety of decentralized states. Feudal states were characterized by their modular structure. The head of state, usually a king, only ruled directly in a small part of the realm but his vassals – local magnates – governed their provinces with considerable autonomy. They in turn could have other vassals under them in a similar relationship and in large feudal states there could be several such layers. The military power of a feudal state was primarily its warrior elite – the ruling aristocracy and their bands of armed retainers.

Because early centralized states seem closer to modern states than feudal ones, we often feel that they were more 'advanced', more modern. But they were not necessarily stronger competitors. There were pros and cons to both forms. The professional army of a centralized state was capable of more concentrated and sustained action than a feudal host of warriors and was better at achieving large scale conquests backed up by the greater organizational abilities of the centralized state. On the other hand, such a state could be vulnerable to sweeping conquests if enemies managed to destroy its standing army and leave it defenceless as happened to Rome in the 5th century AD (see chapter 6).

In this respect a feudal state could be far more resilient, with its warriors dispersed in local strongholds providing excellent defence in

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depth. Once the European system of feudal states was in place (about 1000 AD), it changed remarkably little despite endless warfare. On the downside was a lack of effective grand strategy. The king usually exerted only limited control over his vassals and they often acted quite independently which could prove disastrous on extended campaigns. Discipline was often lax and magnates had a tendency to leave in the middle of a campaign because they got bored or had some pressing business at home. For this reason, feudal states were often all but incapable of sweeping conquests, at least against other similar states. They could sometimes manage to expand outside feudal Europe but only by harnessing their warriors' greed and promising them lands in the new territories (see chapter 8). Characteristically, the most spectacular conquests of feudal Europe – the Crusades – did not result in the extension of any existing feudal state but rather the creation of new ones. The First Crusade involved not a state extending its influence or territory but rather a host of independent warriors uniting to carve out a place for themselves in the world (and serving their God in the process). The same applies to other successful Crusades, including the infamous 4th Crusade, which got sidetracked into conquering Christian Byzantium, and the Baltic Crusades against pagan Eastern Europeans.

These types of early states should not be taken too literally. Intermediate forms also existed, for example, as the feudal states of Europe transformed themselves into centralized states and eventually the modern state (see chapter 9). Various hybrids can also be found, such as the Hellenistic states, which were basically centralized but included several city-states that had considerable autonomy and were, therefore, in a kind of 'feudal' relationship with the central government.⁵⁷ Hellenistic states, thus, showed characteristics of all three 'types'. The purpose of this discussion on early states is primarily to show that they were not all the same and their behaviour, actions and interactions varied accordingly.

Some anthropologists claim that states have existed that had no system of writing or keeping records.⁵⁸ This certainly depends on how one defines statehood but it is quite obvious that only the simplest or smallest states can possibly survive without being able to keep records, and keeping records requires some system of storing information as symbols, in the form of some kind of writing or proto-writing. The Inca Empire in South America was less than a century old when conquered by Pizarro in 1532, and even if it did not possess a proper system of writing it had developed a means of keeping records in the form of *quipus*, coloured knotted strings capable of storing limited information. It may very well be that the development

of writing can stimulate more complex social organization, as the anthropologist Jack Goody has argued, but this most certainly cuts both ways.⁵⁹ There can be little doubt that the development of states, with their need for storing information in a non-personal way, is a major causal factor in the creation of writing systems. Most of the evidence of early writing points to its primary use for administrative purposes such as keeping track of taxes and property.⁶⁰ The first true writing system was invented by the Sumerians of Mesopotamia around 3200 BC and 90% of its earliest surviving inscriptions were clerical records with the remaining 10% being exercises for scribes.⁶¹

The correlation between writing systems and statehood is quite remarkable.⁶² Sumer, Egypt, China, Etruscans, Rome, the Mayas – the list goes on and on – all seem to have adopted or developed writing as they built their first states. In some cases it may be claimed that we only know about early states because of the adoption of writing, leaving open the possibility that the states might be much older. But this sort of argument is generally not very convincing. The concentration of wealth and communal effort that usually accompany state-building is often evident in the archaeological record at precisely the time of the first written evidence. Even more revealing is the fact that the Mycenaean Greeks of the Bronze Age acquired writing as they built their state or states but lost it as their civilization collapsed (chapter 2). For several centuries, in the Greek ‘Dark Age’, it is impossible to envisage the existence of any states. During this time, Greece was also without letters but regained both in the 8th century BC (chapter 3). Thus, the rise and fall of states and writing in perfect unison strongly suggests a causal link. To turn to Northern or barbarian Europe, the Gauls, just prior to the Roman conquest, were constructing states from their tribal kingdoms at the same time as they were also adopting the Greek alphabet for their own use (chapter 5). In this case, we are not confined to archaeological evidence in monitoring state-building but also have written narratives from the Romans and can therefore claim with relative certainty that statehood and writing emerged together in Gaul.

It is quite possible to define civilization on grounds of writing or other symbolic systems and many scholars have implicitly done so. Although this is convenient for the historian because of our dependence on written sources, I choose to equate civilization with statehood as I feel this represents a more important change in human society than does writing. Early literacy was usually confined to a small educated elite and did not directly affect the lives of the majority. On the other hand, the profound change in power structure that accompanied state formation concerned everyone living within its

confines. In any case, writing usually followed statehood fairly closely, at least where it could be learned from neighbours. Therefore, civilized societies usually incorporated both statehood and literacy, and it seems hard to reject the idea that the development of writing was profoundly stimulated by the emergence of the state.⁶³

Confined as it was to a small educated elite, early literacy by itself does not necessarily have a profound impact on how society works, but it does provide us with much better information.⁶⁴ This means that studying a literate society without a state could be of the greatest importance. Since literacy usually seems to follow statehood or is contemporaneous with its rise, such societies are extremely rare and only appear in very special circumstances. In European history, there are only two noteworthy examples of this, one being Ireland of the Early Middle Ages and the other Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries. In both these cases Christianity, an organized religion highly dependent on books and writing, introduced literacy. Practising Christianity without literacy (at least in the priesthood) was not an option. In the Middle Ages, states and central government were usually poorly developed and, as the church was often far better organized than medieval states, it could, in some respects, act as its substitute. In Ireland and Iceland, the church introduced organizational principles and widespread literacy into societies that lacked statehood and the result in both of them was an unusual flowering of literature best explained by the presence of barbarian competitive systems (chapter 7).

Therefore, the people of Ireland and Iceland can be called *literate barbarians* and the information they give us about themselves is highly relevant for the European barbarians in general. In the following pages, I will sometimes refer to them, especially the (to me) more familiar Icelanders, as examples of how things worked in barbarian Europe. Of course, we must be aware that what Icelandic and Irish sources tell us is not necessarily typical of barbarian Europe – *literate* barbarians are, after all, hardly typical – but, when properly used, they can give us an idea about the barbarian world and how it worked. What these sources generally reveal is that there was not much difference between barbarian and civilized populations except in matters directly connected with statehood and political organization. The Irish and the Icelanders were in no way more ‘barbarous’ (in the prejudicial sense) or harder to understand than their continental cousins and their societies and economies basically operated along similar lines. This does not mean that all previous barbarian societies in Europe were similar to the Irish and Icelandic ones, only that there

is no reason to assume that different rules applied to barbarian and civilized societies, except in matters related to political organization.

Despite the existence of these uncharacteristic literate barbarians, the development of writing means that we usually know a lot more about states and their societies – the civilized part of the world – than we do about the barbarians, and this has led to no end of misconceptions and prejudice. Modern historians still often copy uncritically comments about the barbarians from ancient sources without giving a thought to their accuracy. Fortunately, archaeology has done much to increase our knowledge but we will never be able to know barbarian history in the same detail as that of states and civilizations.

The Laws of History

Theories, models, systems and ‘laws’ have the power to explain general historical processes, even if their power of prediction is limited and non-existent when it comes to details. The sciences of chaos and complexity teach us that even if we cannot predict the effects of a butterfly flapping its wings, we can still understand them. Stuart Kauffman, one of the proponents of the new science of complexity, put it revealingly:

How can life [in the biological sense] be contingent, unpredictable, and accidental while obeying general laws? The same question arises when we think about history. Historians have differed, some eschewing any hope of finding general laws. I, surely no historian, shall nevertheless have suggestions to make. For the hope arises that viewed on the most general level, living systems – cells, organisms, economies, societies – may all exhibit lawlike properties, yet be graced with lacework of historical filigree, those wonderful details that could easily have been otherwise, whose very unlikelyhood elicits our awed admiration.⁶⁵

Talking about general laws of history makes most historians cringe and I have to admit that getting my own head around the idea took some effort. But, of course, there are such laws. The alternative is unthinkable, a world of chaos in which nothing is predictable because everything is unique. If there are no laws of history, no explanation could be used twice because then it would constitute a law and should also be applicable not only to the two cases in question but to all similar cases. As a matter of fact, all historians who deign to explain their subject matter use general laws, usually without

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knowing it. If an explanation is valid in a particular case, it should also be valid in a different case where the situation is the same. Therefore, it constitutes a general law of history. Every causal explanation in history is a general law in disguise. If one wishes to believe (as Edward Gibbon did) that the Roman Empire fell because Christianity sapped its moral strength and will to resist the barbarians, it only makes sense if one assumes that adopting a pacifist and excessively otherworldly religion can weaken *any* similar empire from within. The latter would, if valid, constitute a general law of history.

Social scientists have been busy for some time discovering the laws of human society, and, if they are not totally mistaken, such laws must not only exist for contemporary societies but historical ones as well. It is the essence of scientific research to discover how we can describe the world in general terms rather than to simply explain each individual case without linking it to similar cases. The apple that supposedly fell on Newton's head is not scientifically very interesting but the law of gravity that made it and all other apples fall to the ground is very interesting indeed. By observing that things like apples fell to the ground, Newton discovered the general law of gravity. This law can then be used to describe how all objects with mass affect each other, not just apples falling to the ground.⁶⁶ We observe reality to discover general laws and then use these laws to make sense of what we observe.

Historians have always been good at observing and describing reality. For some mysterious reason, however, they have normally shied away from using these observations to discover the general laws of history. Students of other disciplines, such as sociologists and anthropologists, are not so shy and have been busily engaged in trying to discover the laws of human society for some time. In doing so, they have often invaded the field of history and historians themselves have been known to use laws provided by other disciplines. Indeed, it seems that most historians are more comfortable utilising the laws discovered by sociologists or anthropologists than trying to discover some for themselves. This is rather unfortunate, because sociologists have a tendency to concentrate on modern industrial societies whereas anthropologists most often contemplate what they sometimes call 'primitive' societies. As few apart from historians pay them much attention and historians, generally speaking, don't concern themselves with general laws, this leaves out most civilized agricultural societies, in fact most of written history. Therefore, the general laws of the history of agricultural societies are a kind of no-

man's-land and are likely to remain so, unless historians like myself make an effort to explore it.

One cannot read a book through a microscope. Sometimes it is essential to take a step back and look at the big picture; otherwise it won't make any sense at all. Historical study that takes this approach is usually referred to as *macro-history* and, not surprisingly, is practised mainly by sociologists. To my mind, it is unfortunate that historians have not paid more attention to macro-history because they should be much more intimate with historical knowledge and practice than most sociologists. Leaving the field entirely to scholars who, frankly speaking, are not specialists in historical study, risks leaving out important parts of the bigger picture.

In writing this book I am, in some small way, attempting to write a macro-historical study of agricultural societies as a historian, rather than a sociologist, would. The subject matter is competitive systems and expansion cycles, and the result is a model for expansion cycles that is consistent with most or all well-known barbarian expansions in Europe and also applies to at least two expansive episodes emanating from civilized Europe. These expansion cycles are not confined to barbarian society but have a more general application, and the model applies to all agrarian societies that show the relevant characteristics, whether in Europe or elsewhere. Confining the study to Europe is simply a matter of convenience (see appendix 1 for some possible competitive systems and expansion cycles in other parts of the world).

¹ See Wilson (2007) for an inspiring introduction to evolutionary thinking in the study of human society.

² Which, of course, is the title of one of Douglas Adams' novels in his Hitchhiker's Guide series.

³ The reader may be surprised to see ravens mentioned as a 'cultured' species but they are, in fact, astonishingly sophisticated creatures. See Heinrich (2006).

⁴ As D.S. Wilson (2007, p. 218), put it: "Our capacity for culture shifted evolution into hyperdrive."

⁵ Dawkins (2006b), pp. 189-201.

⁶ Dawkins (2006a).

⁷ I use the term *polity* as a general term for autonomous political units with or without state organization.

⁸ For a different, and perhaps more reasonable, evolutionary view of religion, see Wilson (2002).

⁹ Laymen's introductions to this field are provided by M. Mitchell Waldrop (1992) and Roger Lewin (1999). For more profound (but still relatively accessible) contributions, see, for example, John H. Holland (1995 and 1998) or Stuart Kauffman (1995 and 2000). For the social sciences, Robert Axelrod's

contributions are especially valuable (Axelrod 1984 and 1997). For the application of complexity in the social sciences and anthropology in particular, see Lansing (2003).

¹⁰ See also Kauffman (1995), pp. 16-23.

¹¹ Vonnegut (1985).

¹² Nor do they necessarily produce the most efficient possible solutions. Terrestrial vertebrates, such as ourselves, still use respiratory systems – lungs – that mix the outgoing used air with incoming fresh air. It would obviously be more efficient to take a cue from our digestive system (or from the gills of our marine ancestors) and create a passage which never mixes the used with the unused. Evolution, however, simply hasn't found this solution and we seem to be doing alright with our inefficient lungs.

¹³ Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was one of the fathers of the rather disreputable ideology of Social Darwinism which sought to apply a crass interpretation of Darwinian rules to human society, justifying social inequity but (unlike Darwin) mostly disregarding cooperation. It was Spencer, not Darwin, who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest' (Spencer, 1870 (vol. 1), pp. 444-445).

¹⁴ Axelrod (1984). See also Dawkins (2006b), pp. 202-233.

¹⁵ See also Wilson (2007), pp. 133-138 ("Groups All the Way Down").

¹⁶ Hofstadter (1979), pp. 311-365.

¹⁷ Lansing (2003), p. 192.

¹⁸ Kauffman (1995), pp. 23-28, 71-92. For an in-depth discussion of emergence, see especially Holland (1998).

¹⁹ That is to say, the agents themselves cooperate perfectly. A sort of competition between patterns and pathways can still exist in such systems.

²⁰ See Wesson (1978), Jones (1981), pp. 104-126 and *passim*. For the fundamental role of competition between states in such systems, see Tilly (1992), esp. pp. 14-16.

²¹ Archaeologists and others have increasingly acknowledged the importance of such systems, even in stateless and prehistoric societies. See especially Renfrew (1986). Barbarian (i.e. non-state) societies can be no less violent and competitive than states, and are in fact often considerably more likely to engage in war. The myth of the peaceful savage has been effectively demolished by L. Keeley (1996).

²² A similar approach has been suggested before, at least by Cherry (1986), p. 44.

²³ Not, however, to be confused with Social-Darwinism. See note 13.

²⁴ Although most historians of warfare occasionally refer to the popular or elite nature of armies, I am unaware of this dichotomy having been previously used as a guiding principle or a general approach to the history of warfare (except perhaps by Andreski, 1968, but he can hardly be called a historian of warfare).

²⁵ For prehistoric warfare, see e.g. Christensen (2004); Ferrill (1985) pp. 9-31; Vencel (2004); Chapman (2004) and Keeley (1996), pp. 36-39 and *passim*.

²⁶ Vencel (2004), pp. 58-67. Harding (2004), p. 162. Kristiansen (2004), pp 176-177.

²⁷ Ferrill (1985), 38-44. Osgood et al. (2000), pp. 10, 23-30, speak of the first 'arms race' in the Bronze Age.

²⁸ Crawford & Whitehead (1983), pp. 30-32 (quoting Thucydides and Strabo).

²⁹ For a Roman perception of European barbarians, see Wells (1999), pp. 99-107 and Wells (2001), pp. 103-109.

³⁰ For the development of the dichotomy barbarism – civilization, see Kristiansen (2000), pp. 7-13.

³¹ In this book, the terms *farmer* and *peasant* are used more or less interchangeably, while many scholars would restrict the use of *farmers* to those principally producing to sell and *peasants* to those producing for direct consumption. The latter terminology, however, is somewhat derogatory and may be unfamiliar to many modern readers. Therefore, the more familiar and general term *farmers* is here used for both groups as indeed has become common practice in archaeology and anthropology. However, I sometimes use *peasants* as a general term for unfree, tenant or oppressed farmers or for reasons of historical conformity.

³² For the beginning of agriculture in the Near East and its spread to Europe, see, for example, Tudge (1998), Smith (1995) and especially two collections of papers: *Last Hunters – First Farmers* (1995) and *Europe's First Farmers* (2000).

³³ Manzura (2005). Kohl (2007), pp. 23-54.

³⁴ Renfrew (1989), pp. 197-200.

³⁵ See, for example, Gellner (1989), pp. 16-20.

³⁶ See Gamble (1986).

³⁷ *Tribe* is an often loosely defined and controversial concept but usually designates the largest effective political unit in non-state societies, although in a deeply stratified society they are often referred to as *chiefdoms*. As a rule, a tribe is more or less autonomous, with some mechanism for making common or governmental decisions and its members have some kind of common identity. See: *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, 'Tribe': <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribe> (accessed March 8. 2006). *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, p. 626.

³⁸ There is a lively debate in archaeology as to whether archaeologically defined *cultures* can be equated with ethnic identity (usually including a common language). It appears to me that even if it is not possible to affirm such a connection in each case and the boundaries of archaeological cultures and ethnicities may not coincide exactly, some correlation is usually to be expected. See e.g. Sims-Williams (1998). For the development of the concept of an archaeological culture, see Kristiansen (1998) pp. 18-24.

³⁹ As a biological analogy, we might say that a culture equals a species and a polity equals an individual of that species. Animals can either compete with other members of their species or cooperate with them. The same presumably applies to polities in cultures, although we are here mostly concerned with competition and competitive systems. However, it is perfectly feasible that some multi-polity cultures could form *cooperative* systems instead of competitive ones, although these systems would lack the dynamism of the latter.

⁴⁰ Wesson (1978).

⁴¹ Tilly (1992).

⁴² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* XVII, 6.

⁴³ See, for example, Wesson (1978), pp. 61-79, but be aware of his dated material, liberalist leanings and tendency to equate external pluralism (many states instead of just one) with internal pluralism (democracy or republicanism).

⁴⁴ See Renfrew (1986); Cherry & Renfrew (1986). Historians have also been known to use this concept, e.g. Ma (2003).

⁴⁵ Some of the literature discussing migrations does not make this necessary distinction, e.g. Anthony (1990).

⁴⁶ Keeley (1996), p. 111.

⁴⁷ See Anthony (1990), pp. 896-897.

⁴⁸ Anthony (1990, 1992), Chapman & Dolukhanov (1992). As an example of the rehabilitation of migration one could mention that T. Douglas Price and his colleagues have been using the detection of strontium isotopes in bones and teeth to detect prehistoric population movements. Price et. al (1998, 2001).

⁴⁹ From "Politics as a Vocation." Weber (1946), p. 78.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Reynolds (1996), pp. 26-27. She substitutes 'control' for 'monopoly' but this, in fact, makes the definition far too broad because most or all human societies would claim to control the use of physical force in some way.

⁵¹ An influential theory of state-formation was presented by Carneiro (1970). See also e.g. Hedeager (1992), pp. 83-87.

⁵² According to Cohen (1978), pp. 2-4, this would fall into the class of definitions of state based on 'authority structures'. Others are based on stratification or a collection of diagnostic traits or information processing, the last-named of which Cohen lumps together with authority structures.

⁵³ In the Swedish 'Age of Liberty' (1718-1772), for example, the source of political authority was 'the people' as expressed in the Diet. Katajala (2004c), p. 206.

⁵⁴ Hopkins (1978), p. 94, says "almost half of the total imperial budget" for Rome in Augustus' reign; Campbell (2002), p. 85, says up to 40% for the Roman Empire of the early 1st century AD. The early Roman Principate was hardly the most militaristic state of the ancient world. This proportion was considerably higher in the late empire, probably more than two-thirds, see Mitchell (2007), p. 53; Elton (1996), pp. 118-127.

⁵⁵ This division is based to some extent on Kristiansen's 'decentralised archaic state' and 'centralised archaic state'. Kristiansen (1998), pp. 46-48. See also *The City-state in Five Cultures*, pp. xiii-xx (editors' introduction).

⁵⁶ *Feudalism* is the term usually applied to medieval socio-political organization (except by Marxists, who use the term differently) and refers to territories and kingdoms being controlled through *vassalage*, where the vassal was given the right to control and benefit from his *fief* in return for certain services, usually of a military nature. The very existence of feudalism has been challenged by Susan Reynolds (1996) but this problem does not concern us here. I use *feudal state* as a general term for decentralized states of which

the medieval kingdoms of Europe were classic examples, whether or not feudalism, as defined above, truly existed.

⁵⁷ see Chamoux (2003), pp. 165-213, Shipley (2000), pp. 59-107.

⁵⁸ See Goody (1986), p. 91.

⁵⁹ Goody (1986, 1987).

⁶⁰ Goody (1986), pp. 45-126. Goody (1987) pp. 30-31.

⁶¹ Green (1991), p. 54.

⁶² Cherry (1986), p. 32. Haas (2004), p. 12.

⁶³ Giddens (1995), pp. 94-95, 169-170.

⁶⁴ Goody (1986, 1987) might disagree with the first half of this statement.

⁶⁵ Kauffmann (1995), p. 19.

⁶⁶ Newton's law of universal gravitation has been superseded by the general theory of relativity but it is still an excellent approximation.

2. THE URNFIELD EXPANSION

The first expansion cycle for which we have some written evidence took place more than three thousand years ago, at the end of the Bronze Age. At that time, most of Europe was still a barbarian realm. Only Greece knew statehood and writing and was soon to revert to barbarism as the expansion began. The expansion did not stop at the extremes of Europe but spread its effects to Egypt and Western Asia, causing such destruction that few written documents describing it have survived. As the first expansion cycle examined in this book it will serve as a sort of prototype upon which we shall begin to build the models of competitive systems and expansion cycles.

Catastrophe at the End of the Bronze Age

Amenhotep II, pharaoh of Egypt 1448-1422 BC, boasted that he could hit four targets set thirty four feet apart, from a speeding chariot, with such force that the arrows penetrated three inches of copper.¹ At this time, in the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, chariot warfare was all the rage in the Near East. This was elite warfare par excellence.

Not much is known about the development of warfare prior to the war chariot. In fact, even the nature of chariot warfare has not been conclusively established although scholars such as Robert Drews have done much to enhance our understanding. Pre-chariot warfare is still so little understood that it is best left alone for the moment, so we shall instead begin the story in the 2nd millennium BC with the appearance of the war chariot.

Two-wheeled carts had been known at least from the 3rd millennium BC but these early examples were rather clumsy constructions with solid heavy wheels and probably pulled by donkeys or onagers² rather than horses. We have no evidence that they were used in war and they may instead have been used for carrying messages or hunting. The war chariot was perfected in the early 2nd millennium BC, when a pair of horses was harnessed to a very light chariot on spoked wheels, carrying a driver and a warrior. The structure was so light, in fact, that a single man could carry the chariot, but it still had to be extremely resilient and strong.³ It is not surprising that chariot construction was a highly specialized craft resulting in a product that was not only of excellent quality but also very expensive. The Bible, although dating from a later period, says that King Solomon paid 600 shekels of silver for a chariot and 150

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shekels for each horse (1 Kings 10.29). A chariot with a team of horses but without the costly weaponry and armour of driver and warrior would therefore cost 900 shekels, which appears to have been the equivalent of damages paid for the death of no less than 30 slaves (Exodus 21.32).⁴ Therefore, the cost alone would clearly indicate the elite nature of chariot warfare. Only the wealthy or the state could afford to own war chariots and even rich and powerful Egypt seems not to have been able put more than couple of thousand of them into the field at any given time.

What made the chariots so successful? The great kingdoms of the 2nd millennium BC apparently depended mostly on their chariotry for their defence and conquests. Therefore, we must assume that they were very efficient instruments of war capable of defeating much larger forces of infantry. Much mystery still surrounds the way in which war-chariots were used, since our historical sources for that period are rather meagre. Although no reconstruction of chariot warfare is fully reliable, the one put forward by Robert Drews is the most convincing. According to him, the efficiency of the chariot goes hand in hand with the development of the composite bow made of wood, horn and sinews, the manufacture of which was also a very specialized craft and produced a weapon of superior range and penetration power in spite of its small size, making it ideal for the limited space aboard a chariot. It goes without saying that only the most able and best trained warriors could be trusted with such expensive equipment.⁵

The primary use of the war chariot seems to have been as a highly mobile firing platform. Armed with composite bows, chariot warriors could range all over the battlefield, raining arrows over the stationary infantry, which had little chance of closing with them in an open field. Of course, once the superiority of chariotry became known, all the major powers rushed to develop their own and most major battles of the period seem to have involved two opposing forces of chariots charging each other.

Infantry still existed but in a clearly supportive role, providing defensive walls that chariots could retreat behind or skirmishers who followed the chariots and finished off immobilized opponents. This sort of warfare was fundamentally different from that which prevailed in later classical antiquity when infantry was in the leading role and cavalry, the successor to the older chariotry, was in a supporting one. Chariots dominated in warfare down to the 13th century BC when dramatic changes started to take place.

In the 13th and 12th centuries BC a major catastrophe struck the civilized world of the Near East and southeastern Europe, which

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plunged the area into a 'Dark Age' lasting several centuries. The darkness is, of course, due to the lack of written sources in the wake of the catastrophe, and this is also why the course of events or reasons for the devastation remain mysterious. The reconstruction of the catastrophe rests on very meagre written evidence, some from much later periods, and on archaeology, which obviously cannot replace a written narrative. This is probably why historians and archaeologists have so much fun discussing this period. Nothing gets the imagination going like great big gaps in our knowledge.⁶

The first to suffer was the Mycenaean empire. In the early 13th century BC the palace of Pylos in the southwestern Peloponnese, one of the richest palaces of Mycenaean Greece, was attacked, sacked, burned and destroyed, apparently without warning.⁷ The Mycenaeans had not paid much attention to city defences prior to the destruction of Pylos. Now they scrambled to build walls around their major centres, but to no avail. Around 1200 BC, unknown assailants destroyed all their major palaces. Since the archaeological record indicates a severe depopulation of the countryside, the destruction was clearly not confined to the palaces. Some recovery apparently took place after the worst attacks, but war remained rampant and Mycenaean civilization gradually dwindled out of existence as new and alien cultural elements made their appearance.

By 1200 BC and during the subsequent years of the early 12th century, the devastation spread into Asia Minor and destroyed the great Hittite kingdom of central Anatolia. Mesopotamia got off lightly, perhaps because the Assyrian kingdom put up a spirited defence, the destruction spreading instead down through the Levant, Syria and into Palestine. Egypt survived, but had to fight off repeated invasions from land and sea that so taxed its resources that it went into a spiral of decline. Thus, the centralized kingdoms of Egypt and Mesopotamia (Assyria) managed to survive the turmoil but the feudal states of Mycenaean Greece and Hittite Anatolia were destroyed, which could be indicative of a shift from elite to mass warfare (see chapter 1). Such a change could be accommodated by the administration of a centralized state, which depended in any case on a professional standing army. All the state had to do was to change the configurations and tactics of its armed forces without necessarily affecting its social structure. On the other hand, there was no clear division in a feudal state between the military and social structures. If the social elite lost its military superiority, it would also lose its power and the state would collapse unless it was somehow able to transform itself into a centralized state.

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There are two basic approaches to explaining the catastrophe of ca. 1200 BC, using either internal or external factors. In fact, this also applies to most other incidences in which a civilization is destroyed, for example the Indus valley civilization (3rd to 2nd millennium BC) or the Roman Empire. Internal explanations usually take the form of some sort of *system collapse* theory. Sometimes the collapse is attributed to environmental causes such as drought, plague or the depletion of natural resources.⁸ Others point to internal conflicts within the civilization, a disruption of trade or a disproportionate growth of the state apparatus, which caused such upheaval that the whole system collapsed.⁹ State organizations came crumbling down, cities were evacuated, famine struck and general depopulation and decline followed. According to such scenarios the internal weakening of civilizations explains the presence of invaders, which is usually well attested, and they are seen not as causing the destruction but rather taking advantage of it.

One of the most influential of these collapse theorists is Joseph Tainter, who in his book, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, applied the well-known economic principle of *diminishing returns* to social complexity.¹⁰ Tainter claims that as societies grow more complex, the benefits of increased complexity diminish and eventually reverse unless there is some new source of energy capable of fuelling the increase. From this he postulates that societies can only grow complex up to a certain point (barring new energy sources) before they must collapse. While Tainter's analysis of the diminishing returns of complexity may very well be useful and valid, he does not show convincingly why complexity should generally increase in most societies, especially as it does not usually benefit all its members and is often in direct opposition to the interests of the lower classes. Even if complexity has been increasing since the Industrial Revolution in keeping with greater energy resources and more and more societies have become increasingly complex over the last few millennia, this does not allow us to conclude that all societies have some inner mechanism that compels them to increase their complexity. Increased complexity can just as well be the result of competition that in the long term favours complex societies, especially those that control effective energy sources. In this case, it is a question of 'natural' selection rather than each society being predestined to evolve in this way. Nor does Tainter succeed in showing why the diminishing returns of complexity must result in collapse, rather than a mere cessation in the growth of complexity and the establishment of some sort of equilibrium.

Most importantly though – and this applies to most general collapse theories – Tainter completely fails to show why we should need a general theory of collapse. He simply assumes, without any argument, that there must be some single universal law behind the collapse of civilizations that explains them all. He is rather like a coroner handicapped by working on the assumption that people can only die from spontaneous combustion and nothing else. Of course, there are no verified cases of people dying from spontaneous combustion but the same applies to civilizations succumbing to ‘system collapse’. Tainter’s assumption of a single cause for all collapses is without foundation and is certainly false unless this ‘law’ is an extremely general one.¹¹

System collapse models are difficult to confirm. In fact, I do not know of a single case of collapse for which a particular model of internal system collapse is a generally accepted explanation. Many of these models are simply inventions of scholars who find the violence of war and migrations so distasteful that it should not be mentioned in polite company. Instead they concoct an alternative compatible with the political correctness of social and economic developments. The problem is that system collapse models are all too easy to construct but impossible to substantiate. All societies have internal conflicts and problems and all of them suffer difficulties and setbacks. This means that in any given situation we can find problems which, if they got out of hand, would lead to ‘system collapse’ whether it actually followed or not. A balanced view of the situation prior to 1200 BC does not reveal any new social, economic or environmental problems that should have proved unmanageable for the established civilizations.¹²

Although the prevailing mood in modern archaeology generally tends to favour internal over external causes, in this case external impact is indicated by the evidence. The catastrophic nature of these events can hardly be explained by anything but some types of invasions. However, we should be careful not to accept simplistic migratory explanations. Scholars have often found it too easy to explain major upheavals by reference to tribes of migrating barbarians. There certainly may have been invasions by migrating barbarians, but this in itself does not explain the catastrophe. We need to explain why the barbarians attacked and why they succeeded. What made the barbarians suddenly move against the organized civilizations and why were the latter not able to repel them now, as they must have done before? If we are to accept an external explanation, as I feel we must, we must also explain the shift in the

balance of power in favour of the barbarians, what caused this shift and what were its long term effects.

The attacks seem to have started in Mycenaean Greece, which indicates a European origin for the barbarians involved in the catastrophe. Archaeology and the written sources, such as they are, seem to confirm this. The attacks appear to have originated either from Central Europe or the central Mediterranean, Sicily, Sardinia or even Tuscany, in Italy. It is possible that both areas were involved, especially since the trade connection between Central Europe and the east, up to this time, seems to have traversed the west coast of Italy, which means that any developments spreading from Central Europe may have been echoed around the route.¹³

It so happens that around 1300 BC new trends were felt over wide areas of Central Europe. In archaeology they are characterized by a new burial practice, that of cremation instead of inhumation. The ashes were put into urns and buried in so called *urnfields*. From this practice the new cultural conformity in Central Europe is called the *Urnfield Culture*. It appears to have had its origins in the Carpathian Basin but spread rapidly over wide areas, and is indeed often identified as the primeval origin of the calamities that struck Greece and the Near East around 1200 BC.¹⁴ Apparently, the new burial practice reflects a new way of thinking about the afterlife. However, as urns and grave-goods were all much the same and quite simple to begin with, it was also an egalitarian burial rite. The causes of the Urnfield phenomenon are not well understood, nor is its spread over Central Europe. Did it involve migrations, cultural dissemination or, as is most probable, a combination of both? The identification of the original Urnfielders is also in doubt. They have been variously identified as Illyrians (later attested in the west Balkan area), Celts, Dorians (later in Greece), Thracians (later in the east Balkans) and others. However, there is no need to assume that they all belonged to the same or related tribes and many scholars believe that the Urnfielders were of various different ethnicities, even if similar customs point to a widespread common identity.¹⁵

The Urnfielders then are our best candidates as the prime movers in the catastrophe, but we still need to explain what set them in motion and what their advantage was. Previously, ironworking was sometimes claimed as their advantage but it has since become clear that, by 1200 BC, iron was not yet used much and the original Urnfielders definitely used bronze swords. In fact, iron working originated among the Hittites, victims of the catastrophe, and only spread in its aftermath.¹⁶ Some have postulated some kind of religious fervour, as indicated by the difference in burial practices and

comparable with the Islamic expansion of the 1st millennium AD, but this seems out of place and is not widely accepted. The long and short of it is that we simply do not know the causes of the Urnfield phenomenon. This does not mean that we should not hypothesize about them. Indeed, without some hypothesis we are unlikely ever to solve the problem.

The Expansion Cycle

The scenario constructed below is a hypothesis that, apart from the direct evidence, is also based on similar episodes from later times and on the theoretical discussion outlined in chapter 1 above. As such, it should not be regarded as the final truth, but rather a possible explanation, given the rather poor state of our current knowledge.

It can be suggested that the Urnfield phenomenon had its roots in a militarization process fuelled by competition between polities in Central Europe. A competitive system would have emerged that induced the various tribes or peoples to direct more and more of their resources to warfare and to hone to perfection their war-making organization and tactics. Due to the limited knowledge archaeology can offer us it is hard to determine the nature or the origin of this competitive system. It may have emerged over a broad area in Central Europe by unknown causes but there is some reason to connect it in particular to the Carpathian Basin, which seems to be the source of the phenomenon. A possible scenario is one of a *periphery system* mentioned above (p. 14). If so, we must assume that the prerequisites for expansion and the means of conquest were developed in that area in the centuries immediately prior to the events of ca. 1200 BC.

Since the main military arm of the organized civilizations was their chariots, we must assume that the evolution of war in the Carpathian Basin produced a kind of warfare that surpassed the chariots. Chariots were well known in Central Europe in the middle of the 2nd millennium BC but we do not know if chariot warfare was practised as much or in the same way as in the Near East. Central Europe was generally hilly and well wooded, and this does not seem ideal for chariots. It may be that chariots were mostly used for displaying prestige and power in this area. However, chariots were definitely used extensively for war in the south-Russian steppe and also on the Hungarian Plain, its extension into the heart of Europe, right in the centre of the Carpathian Basin. These treeless and relatively level grasslands were in fact ideal for chariot warfare and the advantages of chariots could be fully exploited.¹⁷ Chariot warfare

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on the plain could stimulate the emergence of a strong unified polity, constantly harassing, extracting tribute or trying to conquer the weaker groups all around it. The charioteers of the Hungarian Plain would have been quite superior to the barbarian farmers if they encountered them on the plain but would have had difficulties penetrating far beyond it into hilly, wooded or mountainous landscapes. Even if the agriculturalists had cleared some forest for fields and pasture, which the charioteers could put to good use when plundering their settlements, the peasants could always hide in the woods and mountains where no chariot could go. In this way the barbarian foot-soldiers gained some respite in which they could develop their skills against chariotry.

Chariotry was elite warfare, which improved the military capabilities of a few well-equipped men out of all proportion to their numbers. The plainsmen, with their chariots, could use their military superiority to collect plunder and tribute from the surrounding hillsmen and use these resources to maintain their expensive chariotry. The plainsmen group would not have been very large, at least not the warrior elite, but their chariotry would initially have made them much more powerful than their neighbours. To throw off the yoke or to protect themselves from chariot raids, the hillsmen were forced to find ways to cope with their aggressive enemies. Evidence from the Near East from the time around 1200 BC when chariot warfare was being eliminated suggests that the solution was the development of *runners* armed with a shield and a couple of small javelins or darts, some of them also bearing swords and helmets. The shields were of a round, well balanced, type and archaeologically attested in Urnfield Europe and in the Near East at the times of trouble. A runner, light on his feet, would use such a shield with ease but would have been encumbered by the larger, often rectangular, shields used by Near Eastern infantry. Their shields were still good enough to provide some protection against arrows from the charioteers, especially as the runners would have advanced in an open and loose formation so that the charioteers would have had to aim at an individual foot-soldier instead of a throng of infantry.¹⁸

The crucial element of the runners' tactic was mobility; never to provide the charioteer bowmen with a stationary target. This ruled out the bow as the offensive weapon for the runners since an archer has to stand firmly on his feet to be able to use it. Instead they used javelins, the wielder of which had to be running anyway to use them effectively. Javelins were used primarily against the chariot horses, and it was enough to kill or seriously wound one of them to incapacitate the whole team of two horses, a driver and a warrior.

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This scenario is supported by the great increase of small spearheads or javelin points present in Europe at the end of the Bronze Age, when they became much more common than the larger spearheads used for thrusting lances.¹⁹

Once a chariot had been immobilized, runners, armed with swords, closed in for the kill. Thrusting swords or rapiers had been around for a while but at the end of the Bronze Age a new type appears in Europe, the first true slashing sword, a weapon that could not only be used for thrusting but also for dealing terrific blows.²⁰ It was a superior hand-to-hand weapon that could even cut through bronze armour and is well attested in the archaeological record where it is designated as *Naue II* type. This type appears also in the Near East during the catastrophe around 1200 BC where some local metalsmiths inexpertly tried to copy it in an effort to close the tactical gap between invaders and locals.²¹ The quality, balance and overall design of the weapon were such that although the first swords were made of bronze, they were later reproduced in iron as it became more common. Indeed, it provided the fundamental shape for the European slashing sword for as long as it remained a primary instrument of war, throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern period.

The secret or the runners' success lies not only in their tactics and equipment but also in their numbers. A chariot crew of a driver and a warrior would normally not have had much trouble disposing of a couple of runners. But if the runners could field ten or twenty men against each chariot they would be able to turn the tables on the charioteers, and this is a decisive point. Because of their cost and elite nature, chariot forces could never be very large. The resources used for chariot warfare could be redirected to equip a much larger force more simply. The expense used for a single chariot and its crew would probably be enough to equip a few dozen runners with shields and javelins, even if some of them also carried costly swords. Thus, the demise of chariot warfare also implies a shift from elite to mass or even popular warfare. As they developed the runners' tactics, the hillsmen of the Carpathian Basin would have had to mobilize a substantial part of their population to be able to cope with the chariot threat. As their numbers grew, their ranks could not consist solely of professionals and a militia emerged made up of men normally engaged in the primary occupation of these societies, farming. In this way a truly popular army emerged made up of a substantial portion of, or even all, able-bodied men.

The runners' tactics were developed against chariots but once they were eliminated the hillsmen would probably have confronted each other. As a result, their new tactics and arms in this second phase

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would have been directed against either similarly equipped opponents or against other hillsmen living further away from the plain, who had not yet developed this sort of warfare. The tactics employed in these situations are unknown, but runners obviously remained superior to any differently equipped opponents for some time.

In the hills of the Carpathian Basin in the latter half of the Bronze Age, we can suggest that the agrarian population, the common people in most pre-industrial societies, was becoming militarized and turned into warrior-farmers. The image of the warrior-farmer is a familiar one and normally associated with the barbarians of late Antiquity. But the writers of late Antiquity, from whom this image is derived, only saw much reason to describe the barbarians when they were expanding and attacking the Mediterranean civilizations, something they did not do on a daily basis. Therefore, we cannot assume that the description of egalitarian warrior-farmers also applies to more settled times in the barbarian world. In fact, there is little reason to believe that this description even also applied to the middle Bronze Age that seems to have been characterized by elite warfare, not only in the Near East but also in barbarian Europe.²² However, barbarian warrior-farmers do seem to emerge in the late Bronze Age and this had some profound social implications.

Most people probably think of the barbarian communities of prehistoric Europe as both static and relatively egalitarian. However, archaeological research indicates that considerable social and economic changes were quite common. Social stratification was not always the same, neither was it constantly growing. Rather, it fluctuated, being sometimes very pronounced and sometimes almost invisible. Prehistoric Europe should not be regarded as a stagnant backwater, but as a dynamic social, political and economic environment, constantly changing and developing and sometimes bursting unexpectedly onto the scene of the literate civilizations; unexpectedly only because we know less about the internal developments of illiterate Europe than of its more 'advanced' neighbours.

Bronze Age European societies before the Urnfield explosion seem to have been quite stratified. A small elite probably held the reins of power through its ritual importance or warrior qualities, or a combination of both.²³ For most of the Bronze Age, bronze was actually not very important for the production of food or other essentials. For these activities, Bronze Age societies relied on technologies that were similar to those of the Neolithic period and many implements continued to be made of stone as an efficient and cheap alternative to metal. Bronze metallurgy spread only slowly

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because of its limited economic importance and it didn't change much in people's daily lives. Bronze, however, could be made into very effective weapons and armour but only for the few that could afford it because it was difficult to make and expensive. In this way, bronze metallurgy facilitated the emergence of a separate warrior elite that distinguished itself from the general population by the quality of its equipment. In fact, this may very well have been a major reason for the spread of bronze – the desire or need of the elite to set itself apart and be able to excel in warfare.

The middle of the Bronze Age was characterized by elite warfare in the Near East and doubtless in Europe as well. The general population may have had its role in warfare but it was probably a secondary one and they were certainly poorly equipped. The leaders of the hillsmen confronting the chariots in the Carpathian Basin resorted out of need to using their agrarian population more and more as warriors. This involved better armament, and here they were very fortunate since some of the richest metal ores of Europe were situated in their lands, making it easy for them to intensify the production of arms and weapons. Indeed, the Late Bronze Age saw a tremendous increase, a revolution even, in the production of metal and much of this was channelled into making arms and weapons.²⁴

Arming the general population is always potentially dangerous for social elites and those of Central Europe in the late Bronze Age would not have done so unless they had to. This was the first element of the Urnfield cycle, the *militarization* process, turning the common man into a warrior-farmer. The second element must have followed shortly afterwards. By arming the farmers the elite had put new weapons into their hands, not only in the literal sense but also in the sense of empowering them as a social group. The agrarian population now had the means of disposing of the elite if they chose to. The small elite was no longer a match for the armed masses if it came to a confrontation. Actual revolutions may even have taken place in some instances but it is just as likely that the elite saved itself by making concessions, granting the agrarian population what they most desired. Either way, the second part of the cycle can be termed the *democratization* process. Democratization here does not mean the establishment of a recognizably democratic constitution but rather a shift in power from the elite to the people. Elites may have survived in many, even most cases, no longer as masters but rather as leaders who retained their positions through the sufferance of the people. Class distinction must inevitably have been greatly reduced and some kind of egalitarian ideology is likely. This is in fact one of the best known aspects of the Urnfield phenomenon. The cemeteries from which the *Urnfield* term

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comes are flat and bear very little or no signs of class distinction. It is as if the prevailing ideology prohibited people to show any signs of elitism, even in death.

That militarization leads to democratization needs not come as a surprise. About half a century ago, Stanislaw Andreski put forth his ideas of the co-variance of military participation and social stratification.²⁵ He established the rule that a low 'military participation ratio' (meaning the proportion of people involved in warfare) coincided with an elitist regime, but a high ratio with a relatively democratic or egalitarian rule. Some of the conclusions Andreski drew from this basic principle are doubtful or even simplistic, but as a rule of thumb it is quite valid and useful. After all, it only stands to reason, especially in relatively simple societies, that political power is based on physical force and even Aristotle (4th century BC) was aware of this basic principle which is perhaps not surprising as it played an important part in ancient Greek history (see chapter 3).²⁶ However, in this study it is not the fact that power was transferred to the common people that is most important, but rather what the people did with this power.

"You ain't no kind of man if you ain't got land," said Delmar, a rather simple farm boy in depression-era America in the film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* He was going to use his 400,000 dollars share of an elusive treasure to buy back the family farm. This nicely sums up the basic sentiments of agrarian populations everywhere and at all times. What the farmer, peasant, tenant cottager or any other sort of agrarian wanted more than anything else in the world was land, the core of their existence, their means of acquiring sustenance and the vehicle of their reproduction. This was the essence of the third process of the Urnfield cycle. When the agrarians became militarily and therefore politically important, they were in a position to force the elite to grant them their hearts' desire. What they wanted was land, their own land if they had none or more of it if they already owned some. It is a recurring feature of European agrarian history that reproduction was connected to landholding. People could not normally raise families unless they had some land for their own use since there were strong social and economic limitations on marriage for people who did not have the means to support themselves or their children.²⁷ It is impossible to say how far back into prehistory these prohibitions reach, but since they make good economic sense it is quite likely that they had been there since the beginning of farming in Europe. With the political emancipation of the agrarians, their first demand would inevitably be for more land and the elite had to accommodate this demand if it possibly could.

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But where would this land come from? Bronze Age Europe was not densely settled and there appears to have been vast tracts of woodlands that were little utilized. However, most of this land was difficult to clear and cultivate and some of it was not well suited to the agricultural practices of the day. Much land was also used for pasture rather than agriculture, often in some sort of cycle. A field could be used for crops for a few years and when its fertility diminished it was allowed to revert to the wild but could be used to some extent for grazing until fertility had returned and it was ploughed again for another cycle of crops. It appears that the elite had a preference for animal husbandry over agriculture, possibly because it involved less work in relation to food production than the backbreaking toil in the fields. In this context grain-growing can be described as *intensive* land use, while animal husbandry was *extensive*. This means that less land was needed to produce the same amount of food, in terms of calorie consumption, if it was used for crops than if it was used for pasture. The productivity of the land was thus greater under crops than under pasture. The reverse applied to the productivity of labour. Fieldwork produced less food than the work spent in tending animals, meaning that if land was plentiful people had a tendency to lessen their workload by reverting to extensive land use, most often animal husbandry. Conversely, if land was scarce it was made to produce more by growing grain, even if people had to work a little harder. But social relations also have to be taken into account and the preference of elites for extensive land use was often realised simply because of their social supremacy. Consequently, there was often a surplus of easily workable land in the possession of the elite that could, given the right social circumstances, be used more intensively for raising crops.²⁸

It seems likely that this was the land that was first turned over to the warrior-farmers to satisfy their land-hunger, so we should expect a general shift in land use from pasture to agriculture in relation to the Urnfield cycle. This does indeed seem to be the general trend in Urnfield Europe according to pollen analysis and other archaeological data.²⁹ The greater social and economic leeway the agrarians had acquired directly translated into population growth. More people could now start their own families and have more children, as they had acquired the means of support. And as their children grew up they in turn demanded their own land.³⁰ This process would continue as long as there was any easily workable land available. The experience of the 18th century European colonists in North America shows just how fast a population can grow, even without the benefits of modern medicine, when there is plenty of land for the taking.³¹ The

2. The Urnfield Expansion

natural increase reached annual rates of 3%, enough to double the population in less than 25 years.³²

The Urnfield explosion is the first relatively well-known expansion to occur in barbarian Europe that resulted in a complex chain reaction of conquest, migrations and a spread of cultural elements over a wide area. It may not have been the first such expansion and was certainly not the last one and we shall examine some other examples later on. The causes of these explosions are not well understood and there are few if any general theories on the subject.³³ In the scenario presented here as underlying the Urnfield phenomenon we find a military superiority accompanied by land-hunger and a population explosion. This is a recipe for expansion containing all the ingredients required to explain the sudden and dramatic expansion from Central Europe in the time of the urnfields, but it also promises to provide satisfying explanations to similar events later on.

Robert Drews' summation of the changes ca 1200 BC seems to accord well with the hypothesis presented here.

In the Late Bronze Age kingdoms warfare had been a specialist's concern. Civilian conscripts were apparently used only for defence, and massed offensive infantries were conspicuously absent when Late Bronze Age kingdoms (except, perhaps, for Assyria) went to war. After the Catastrophe, political power belonged to those societies in which warfare was every man's concern, the adult males of a community serving as its militia.³⁴

After Effects

The Urnfield expansion spread rapidly over most of Europe and decisively affected the eastern Mediterranean. How much of this expansion was in the form of migrations direct from the source is difficult to say. Most likely it was a complicated expansion involving some migrations and some conquests, but also a spread of ideas, tactics and technology. In some cases, no doubt, polities which came into contact with the original Urnfielders were forced to copy their tactics and social system in order to withstand them. If these were 'civilized' state polities, as were to be found in Greece and Anatolia, this would likely result in the collapse of social stratification and the state, in effect a *barbarization* of previously civilized societies which would then seek to expand for the same reasons as the Urnfielders. In other places the migrating Urnfielders must have merged with the indigenous populations and their common descendants later moved on to carry the expansion still further afield. Some Urnfielders may have

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appeared as conquering warriors and set themselves up as a new elite in the conquered territory, notwithstanding their original egalitarian ethos. In other places it may have been mostly a spread of ideas, with the Urnfield cultural markers becoming fashionable and therefore adopted in part or whole by communities otherwise not directly affected. Ruling elites may even sometimes have adopted the outward signs of the Urnfield culture without otherwise altering their social system. A part of the confusion may even stem from displaced elites, fugitives from democratization turned adrift and forced to make a living the best way they knew how – by war. Some of the *Sea Peoples* that harassed Egypt and the Levant may have been of this kind.³⁵

The Urnfield expansion started about 1300 BC and a couple of centuries later its spread was more or less complete, and a sort of consolidation took over. In European prehistory, the time until the 8th century BC is characterized as the period of Urnfield culture but its original expansion was already over well before 1000 BC. The expansion was halted by geography as it spread to the Atlantic Ocean or to the extremities of Europe where farming communities came to an end. Alternatively it was stopped by the force of opponents strong enough to accomplish this such as the Assyrians, who nevertheless learned a thing or two from the Urnfielders or their successors.³⁶

The old competitive system in the Carpathian Basin was probably destroyed and we know nothing of whether it was replaced by new ones as the expansion spent itself and more settled conditions returned. When the Urnfield explosion reached its limits, the warrior-farmers had to settle down and be content with not being able to acquire more land. In these conditions, continued warfare became pointless; there was nothing to be gained from it. Expansion was no longer possible because neighbours had adapted to the new system of war and there were no more easy victories. The leaders may have wished to continue fighting and try to expand in spite of the more difficult situation, but the Urnfielders were an egalitarian people where the weakened elite could not order about the agrarian population. For the farmers, there was no point in continued belligerence and they refused to wage war, leaving the elite to do its own fighting.

And so we come to the end of the expansion cycle, a time of demilitarization and return to 'normality'. When the farmers could no longer be induced to fight, this signals a return from popular to elite warfare. Elites must have started to rise again as the Urnfield expansion drew to its close. New elites may even have appeared as part of the process when conquerors turned themselves into new elites over the conquered. The prime of the popular armies was during the

expansion but as its force was spent the picture becomes muddled and they begin to deteriorate in marginal areas. The Urnfield culture was, therefore, not an egalitarian culture except in its early stage and elites gradually emerged once more (chapter 4). But before we continue our investigation of barbarian Europe we must return to civilization to review one of the best-known examples of a competitive system and the resulting expansion cycle – ancient Greece.

¹ Drews (1993), pp. 120-121.

² The onager is an ill-tempered relative of the ass and horse, native to Southwest Asia and domesticated quite early. It was later mostly abandoned as a domestic animal in favour of its more agreeable cousins.

³ Drews (1988), p. 85. See also Sandor (2004) for some aspects of the technological finesse of Egyptian chariots. Anthony (2007, pp. 371-411), argues rather convincingly that the war-chariot was invented in the Sintashta culture on the northern edge of the Central Asian steppe around 2000 BC.

⁴ Cf. Drews (1993), p. 110.

⁵ Drews (1988), pp. 89.

⁶ An accessible reconstruction is provided by Robbins (2001).

⁷ Popham (1994), p. 280. There is some disagreement regarding the dating of Pylos' destruction. Others would have it happen about a century later (see Robbins 2001, p. 123).

⁸ A mild example of this sort of environmental determinism is found in Jarred Diamond's book, *Collapse* (2005). It is a mild example because, unlike some others, Diamond realizes that human societies are not helpless against nature but their reactions to its challenges are vitally important (pp. 10-15).

⁹ E.g. Wesson (1967).

¹⁰ Tainter (1988).

¹¹ We can compare this to the biological extinction of species. In the most general terms we can say that species become extinct when they fail to adapt to their changing environment, and exactly the same law can be applied to human societies with the understanding that 'environment' can here apply to the actual physical environment ('nature'), the competitive environment (relations with other societies) or internal social, economic or political developments. There are two variables in this law that need to be explained in each case. One is the changing environment itself, and the other is the inability to adapt in this particular instance. This law is general enough to include most collapse theories but the problem is that these theories would insist that the values of the variables are always the same. However, there is nothing in fact to suggest that this must be the case. It certainly is not with regard to the extinction of biological species – some disappear as they are outcompeted in their search for food, others as they freeze to death when the climate deteriorates etc. I think we can safely assume that the causes of the collapse of civilizations are many and varied, even if they can all be subsumed under the term 'inability to adapt'.

¹² Robbins' (2001, pp. 136-145, 194-203), suggestion that famine and, perhaps, pestilence were the causes of the catastrophe only reflect the modern preoccupation with environmental issues. It is clear from his own account that there is no evidence for any unusual famine or pestilence in this period.

¹³ Sherratt (1994), pp. 274-275.

¹⁴ Especially by Childe (1950, pp. 177-214), although he did not identify the Carpathian Basin as its source. See also Fokkens (1997), p. 360. For a general discussion of migrationist theories regarding the catastrophe, see Drews (1993), pp. 48-76 (although he rejects them).

¹⁵ For an insightful overview of the Urnfield expansion see Kristiansen (1998), pp. 384-391. It should be mentioned that not all of the initial expansion may have belonged to the Urnfield Culture or have had an 'Urnfield identity', especially the elements going south and southeast. Nevertheless, these elements are here considered 'Urnfielders' in a wider sense and the term 'Urnfield expansion' is applied to this expansion cycle in general.

¹⁶ See Drews (1993), pp. 73-76.

¹⁷ Thrane (1994), p. 99. The map (from C.F.E. Pare) indicates a strong concentration of chariot related finds on the Hungarian Plain.

¹⁸ This reconstruction is mostly based on Drews (1993), pp. 174-208 and *passim*. Harding (2004, pp. 170-171), on the other hand, thinks that Drews exaggerates the relative importance of chariotry vs. infantry in the Bronze Age, and therefore the transformation in warfare around 1200 BC. Kristiansen (2004, pp. 177-178), also indicates the importance of Bronze Age infantry, at least in Europe.

¹⁹ Harding (2000), pp. 281-283.

²⁰ For a general discussion of Bronze Age swords in Europe, see Kristiansen (2002).

²¹ Drews (1993), pp. 205-208 (for a general discussion of Naue II type, see also pp. 192-204).

²² For warfare in Bronze Age Europe, see Harding (2000), pp. 271-307. His conclusions seem consistent with elite warfare being dominant.

²³ Harding (2000), pp. 410-413. Cf. Kristiansen (1998, p. 412, fig. 224), who characterizes the *Tumulus* period (1600-1250 BC) by hamlets, animal husbandry and chiefly burials. At least the last two of these are indicative of social stratification (see also chapter 6).

²⁴ Harding (2000), pp. 309-315.

²⁵ Andreski (1968). This is the 2nd, enlarged edition, first published in 1954. See also Campbell (2002), pp. 106-121, for an attempt to use his ideas to illuminate politics of the Roman Empire.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics* VI, 7. Cf. Andreski (1968), p. 45.

²⁷ Jones (1981), pp. 11-16. See also chapter 8 below.

²⁸ See also the Malthus-Boserup debate, below pp. 72-74.

²⁹ Kristiansen (1998), pp. 104-111, 412 (fig. 224). Harding (1994), pp. 315-318 and (2000), pp. 133-163.

³⁰ This would mean smaller but more numerous households and accords well with Fokkens' (1997, pp. 366-367), conclusion that the end of the Bronze Age

in Urnfield Europe saw a split into nuclear family households, resulting in each having a smaller farm but saw their numbers rise two or three-fold.

³¹ From the Indians, of course, and often by dubious or illegal means.

³² McEvedy & Jones (1978), p. 286.

³³ Explanations are confined mostly to single episodes seeking clues in overpopulation, external pressure, natural disasters, or it is assumed that the breakdown of trade triggered the expansion (see chapter 4). None of these really amount to a general theory. References to the 'warlike nature' of barbarian society cannot be taken seriously since they do not explain why they occasionally expanded aggressively but otherwise remained calm.

³⁴ Drews (1993), pp. 224-25. However, he believes that these changes were largely indigenous to the eastern Mediterranean rather than introduced by invaders.

³⁵ According to Robbins (2001, p. 332), there are some indications that the Biblical Philistines (one of the Sea Peoples) were originally professional warriors or mercenaries.

³⁶ Robbins (2001), p. 174. Drews (1993), pp. 17-18, 139-140.

3. THE CITIES OF GREECE

It is quite fitting that the first Europeans to appear on the scene of written history, the ancient Greeks, should do so under the conditions of a competitive system. Such systems seem to have been uncommonly common in Europe, and as they tended to encourage change and development it is not surprising that the first Europeans to leave us written evidence of their world should be the products of a competitive system in southeast Europe, closest to the old civilizations of the Near East.

This was the system of the Greek city-states. To a modern reader used to thinking of a city as something antithetical to farming, a Greece comprised of city-states may not seem like an agrarian society subject to the laws of agricultural production, but in fact it was. Most ancient city-states were basically agricultural communities, their populations primarily farming populations living and working on lands within their borders. A citizen of Athens did not necessarily reside within the city walls even if he frequently visited the urban centre. Even city residents often made their living from farms that could be some distance from their townhouses. As an agricultural society, ancient Greece was no different from others discussed in this book and its competitive system was in many ways typical.

The Greek System

That the Greek city-states competed with each other hardly needs confirmation. The constant rivalries and wars between Sparta, Athens, Corinth, Argos, Thebes and other cities in the Classical period (500-300 BC) are all too well known. In the Archaic period (750-500 BC) these conflicts seem to have been no less common although less destructive. The Greek experience thus seems to fit quite well with the notion that competition between polities, especially in what I have called competitive systems, is highly conducive to change and rapid development and often results in profound changes in warfare, politics, arts and literature, science and technology. To claim that all this happened in ancient Greece is merely stating the obvious. Ancient Greece is also of the most profound importance in history since it has, with good reason, been claimed as the birthplace of European civilization, which owes a great and obvious debt its Greek progenitors. If the roots of all this lie in the Greek competitive system, finding its origins and how it worked is clearly of major significance.

After the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces, there came a period of which little is known, the Greek 'Dark Age', which lasted from about 1100 to 750 BC. As far as can be determined by archaeology, this was a chaotic period with severe depopulation and disorganization when elements from the older Mycenaean civilization mixed with intrusive elements to eventually create something completely new. Evidence of social stratification is lacking in keeping with the apparent egalitarian nature of the Urnfield revolution, the probable ultimate source of the upheaval. Still, there was continuity throughout this Dark Age as demonstrated by the Homeric epics. Probably composed in the late 8th century BC, they describe people and events from the 13th century BC, although the social surroundings depicted in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are probably more reminiscent of the final years of the Dark Age or the beginning of the Archaic period.

Another indicator of continuity is the preservation of Greek dialects, which may have originated from just two basic dialects in the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age. North Greek was the language of the northerners going south and a direct ancestor of the later Northwest Greek, including the Dorian dialects of Spartans and others. South Greek was the language of the Mycenaeans preserved in Arcado-Cypriot and best known from Cyprus that, according to archaeological remains, seems to have become a refuge for an exodus from the Peloponnese during the catastrophe. According to this scenario, the other two dialect groups, Aiolic and Ionian (the dialect of Athens), came about as various mixtures of North Greek and South Greek.¹ However, the ethnic identity of Greeks during the Archaic and Classical periods as Dorians, Ionians and others was not based directly on these dialects. For example the Akhaians of southern Italy and the northern Peloponnese considered themselves the descendants of the Akhaians of the *Iliad* (i.e. Mycenaeans) despite the fact that they spoke a dialect closely allied with Doric. At the same time, the inhabitants of Halikarnassos, in Asia Minor, claimed to be Dorians, even though they wrote (and presumably spoke) in an Ionian dialect.² Ethnicity is not automatically derived from language but is created through a political process and the formation of political units or polities that then interact with each other in a complex way as allies or competitors. Nevertheless, ethnic groupings formed an important part of Greek identity during the Archaic and Classical periods and their beginnings seem to reach back through the turmoil of the Dark Age to the collapse of the Mycenaean world.

By 900 BC things were settling down and permanent political units can be discerned. There were still no cities or city-states but

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their political forerunner, the tribe or *demos*, must have existed by this time. These were kinds of alliances of people sharing the same ethnic identity, lacking in any real government but led by local chiefs or *basilei* (sing. *basileus* often translated as 'king'), whose power and wealth was not spectacular. The *Odyssey*, when it tells of Ulysses' return to Ithaca after twenty years of absence and how he has to fight off his wife's suitors, probably gives a good indication of their status. The chiefs of the *demos* met in a council, the *boule*, presided over by the paramount chief and their decisions were then presented to the assembly of the people, the *agora*.³ Trouble and warfare were frequent between the tribes and, at this time, we probably find a competitive system already in place in Greece. As usually happens in such circumstances, things soon began to heat up.

The formation of city-states began in the 9th century BC but culminated around 750-700 BC, a process called *synoecism*, meaning something like 'coming to live together'.⁴ In this process, the people of the *demos* gathered together to live in a single city or, in some cases such as Boeotia, in more than one. The *basilei* transformed themselves into a landowning elite and assumed the reins of government forming the first oligarchies.

It is also about this time that we begin to see signs of increasing emphasis on ethnic identity. The city-states, or their rulers, needed the new form of government and political organization to be strengthened by a new sense of solidarity. One way to achieve this was by actively promoting old heroic figures as unifying symbols. Around 750 BC ancient forgotten tombs began receiving votive offerings, a development that must reflect greater emphasis on origins and identity.⁵ Ancient heroes have always been of the greatest use in promoting unity and a shared sense of purpose within any political unit. That these identities were in fact open to manipulation and could be subtly altered need not surprise us.⁶ People are not born with ethnic identities; they are cultivated. Ethnicities are not founded on language, kinship, religion, let alone race. The only workable definition of ethnicity is in terms of a group that collectively defines itself ethnically. The group simply decides who belongs and who doesn't and, for this purpose, can employ arbitrary cultural markers – linguistic, religious, historical or geographical. Ethnicity can thus readily be manipulated, for example, through myths and cultic behaviour. The reasons for such manipulation are invariably political and concerned with creating or strengthening political units such as the emerging city-states of 8th century BC Greece.

By the time of the emergence of the city-states at the latest, we can surely speak of a competitive system in Greece.⁷ From this time

3. *The Cities of Greece*

onwards, two main features characterize the history of ancient Greece: intense competition between city-states and dynamic social, intellectual and cultural developments. These are surely connected, but how? Before we can answer this question we should take a look at the basic attributes of competitive systems in general of which ancient Greece is a particularly fine example.

1) *The political units within the system must be autonomous.* Without autonomy there is no real competition. The units must be able to make their own decisions based on their own evaluation of their interests. There is no difficulty applying this to Greece. Although in the 5th and 4th centuries large alliances sometimes appeared which could restrict the cities' freedom of action, their sovereignty was usually reasserted as soon as opportunity allowed.

2) *There must be a kind of political equilibrium where no state is able to overshadow the rest.* If not, the competition becomes ineffective or evaporates. As a growing polity incites jealousies, the balance of power often works in a self-regulating manner. When the lesser polities feel that their autonomy is being threatened they tend to band together to reduce the threat.⁸ In Greece, the famous rivalry between Sparta and Athens often served to maintain the balance, but the preservation of some sort of equilibrium could even become a political doctrine which some governments claimed to adhere to, such as England in the European system (chapter 9) and the Persians of Asian Minor (although not actual members of the Greek system) during the Peloponnesian War.⁹

3) *The Political units of the system must be close to each other.* A state must be able to have close relations with another state in order to compete with it. This, of course, is relative to prevailing technologies and communications. In the modern world of mass transport, airplanes and electronic communications, China can compete with the United States and Argentina with the United Kingdom, although they are oceans apart. The global reach of the modern competitive system is the culmination of a tendency for such systems to inflate as communications improve. Ancient Greece was of suitable size in the ancient world, although its system could probably have been larger, as indicated by the sporadic inclusion of colonies, such as Syracuse in Sicily, in the competition of the Greek homeland.

4) *The units in the system must be similar in their social structure, culture and economy.* This was necessary if they were to be able to copy each other's innovations. If competing polities differed too greatly, such as the Romans and the Germanic barbarians, not all innovations would be transferable and this could disrupt the equilibrium. In many cases, such as in Greece, this similarity meant a common language, but this is not necessary if the level of interaction is otherwise sufficient. However, even if the units within the system are similar, they are not identical. Competition works through the constant effort of the polities to innovate in order to gain an advantage over their opponents, and this means that there are usually subtle but important differences between them.

5) *People inhabiting a competitive system have a kind of dual identity.* Competition is not just brute force but is also a contest for the hearts and minds of the people, not only within each political unit but also within the system as a whole. People do not only identify with 'their' political unit, which is a sort of *inner identity*, but they also have an *outer identity* that relates to the competitive system as a whole. Being an Athenian was an inner identity but all Athenians were also Greeks, their outer identity. In some cases these identities could be triple or even more. Thebans, for example, were Thebans first, Boeotians second and Greeks third, but a dual identity was always the minimum. Friendships and the popularity of each polity within the system were important and in order for this to work there must have been a sense of common identity for the whole system. This was, of course, evident in their common language and culture but also in such institutions as the Olympic Games or the ideology of pan-Hellenism, the ideal of Greek political solidarity.¹⁰ Even if the Greeks fought bitterly among themselves they clearly shared a Greek identity, defining everybody else as 'barbarians'. Strictly speaking, the outer identity need not be an ethnic one. In the European system (chapters 8-9), the outer identity was variously defined as Christian (religious), European (cultural) or even 'white' (racial).

6) *Competitive systems habitually show cultural and technological dynamism.* The competition within the system constantly produces innovations. Political units and their leaders try to enhance their influence and foster civic pride and a sense of identity by investing heavily in the arts, literature or storytelling, knowledge and technology. This can even be seen in

illiterate barbarian systems, which were usually characterized by a new and innovative style used for decoration that is preserved in the archaeological record, even if the rest of the cultural dynamism has vanished without a trace. Direct political and military competition produced new technologies that often had profound effects on consequent developments. One need only mention the evolution of metallurgy, which throughout history has been largely driven by military competition but has also transformed the way in which we live. The cultural and technological dynamism of ancient Greece is so well known that it requires no further emphasizing.

How does competition between polities work and how does it stimulate innovation and change? To answer these questions it is convenient to divide the competition into three fields: political, economic and prestige.

Political Competition.

The most obvious kind of political competition is war, which, until recently, was one of its most common forms and certainly the most important one. There is no clear division between war and other forms of political competition between polities. In the words of Clausewitz, the famous military theorist: "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means."¹¹ In political competition, the goal of each player is to maximize political clout in relation to that of the other players. In the case of a weak polity, the object may be to guarantee its safety and continued existence, but the aim of a stronger one is to extend its sphere of influence or territory. This can be achieved through diplomacy, alliances or war. A state or polity need not always have a strong military to be influential. Sometimes skill as arbitrators or cultural prestige can bring political influence, but this is rather an exception. Normally, a state requires a respectable military presence to be able to survive in a competitive system. Small states, in such situations, usually also rely on alliances with other states.

Of course, political competition stimulates the development of diplomacy but its most noticeable effect is that of rapid developments in warfare. In competitive systems, the ability to survive is largely determined by defensive abilities and works just like natural selection. Only those polities that can defend themselves can survive, the others are doomed to extinction as the stronger ones gobble them up. Survival, in this situation, is largely determined by military force but is supplemented by diplomacy which allows any well connected polity, through its alliances, to appear much stronger than its own resources alone would permit.

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Political competition can also stimulate the development of states.¹² It can necessitate the creation of states where none existed before, as happened in the formation of the Greek city-states, or increase the power and efficiency of existing ones as happened in Europe in the 16th century (chapter 9). A stronger state is better able to design a long-term strategy and has the ability to see it through. It normally also has a greater ability to wage wars in a sustained manner and we therefore often find a tendency for stronger states in competitive systems. Since the mechanisms of states have to be developed as well, this has all sorts of repercussions, a crucial one being literacy, without which effective government would be all but impossible. It is not surprising that writing reappeared in Greece in the 8th century BC at the same time as the city-states. On the other hand, a state sometimes runs foul of the democratization process inherent in expansion cycles and this can, at least in theory, cause its collapse if it is unable to adjust to the levelling of social hierarchies that this involves (chapter 6). In some cases, statehood can even make societies more vulnerable to conquest by a very powerful neighbour as seems to have happened as the Romans conquered Gaul (chapter 5). Statehood is, therefore, not an unequivocal advantage; its benefits always depend on circumstances.

In the end it is a matter of force, and the ability to make war determines survival or extinction. This is why political competition always stimulates developments in warfare, inducing polities within competitive systems to maximize their military capabilities. Therefore, warfare is a fundamental aspect of survival and this can profoundly affect the social structure of the competitive system. The ability to make war is often closely linked with the socio-political organization, and an organization that allows more military power is therefore a survival trait. Those that have it survive but others don't. The constant search for greater military power can, in itself, also induce profound social and political change, an important point we shall frequently return to. Political competition not only stimulates the ability to wage war and technologies directly connected to it, but can also fundamentally affect the social evolution of the societies involved.

Economic Competition

Competition in the modern world is largely economic. Wars have fortunately become rare between the developed industrialised nations, and instead they compete, often fiercely, through their economies. The object of this competition is to acquire the greatest wealth, which not only affects the living conditions of the population and an individual state's prestige, but also directly influences its ability to make war.

Wars are expensive and have become increasingly so, and economic competition has as a result become increasingly important in the competition between states. In the modern world this economic competition is largely conducted through the international trade network, in which companies and nations compete for markets through prices and economic efficiency. However, we should not forget the importance of the strictly domestic economy. In early times there was very little international trade and its direct economic importance was small, although it could be important in providing luxuries for the privileged and disseminating ideas and technology. Economic competition therefore often took the form of stimulating economic activities inside each society without this necessarily having any relationship with the outside world. This could, for example, take the shape of agrarian reform intended to stimulate population growth and a broader tax base or, indeed, the formation of class of warrior farmers (below).

In the end, economic competition is only an indirect form of political competition. Economic strength is translated into political strength through prestige and wealth that help both in forging alliances and maintaining a strong military force. The economic success of Athens is a classic example of this. The city grew rich on her silver mines and trade empire, but her wealth was ultimately used to build up a political empire capable of challenging Sparta's military supremacy. For Athenian politicians, wealth was not just a good thing in itself but a means to become politically important.

Of course, when a state or polity finds it necessary to stimulate its economy in order to be able to keep up with the political competition, this often has a lasting beneficial effect on economic development. Old elites often retard economic growth through their conservatism and unwillingness to change because of their fear of losing their privileges. They frequently form a barrier to economic breakthrough that can be difficult to remove. However, this can still be accomplished if the survival of the polity is at stake. The elite is then presented with the choice of sacrificing some of its interests in order to ensure survival, although it does not always follow that the elite will choose this option. In early modern Poland the aristocrats grew so powerful that they were able and willing to overrule the interests of the state when they ran contrary to their own immediate interests. The result was a weakened Polish state that fell easy prey to its neighbours, who divided Poland between them in the late 18th century. This is the way in which 'natural' selection works in competitive systems. Poland had become maladapted and, therefore, could not survive as a political unit.

Prestige Competition

Prestige is important in any competition, as it increases internal solidarity and the willingness of a population to fight for 'our' cause. People are generally more enthusiastic about their community if they believe that belonging to it is something special. Athenians were more willing to make sacrifices for their city and fight for it in the wars of the 5th and 4th centuries BC because they believed that being an Athenian citizen was a privilege not open to anyone, also making them less ready to accept foreign domination. Athenian politicians and authorities nurtured this feeling for example by imposing strict limits on who was eligible for citizenship (both parents had to be citizens) and by the monumentalism apparent in public buildings, such as those of the Acropolis. Therefore, an Athenian could take great pride in his city, a pride that was easily translated into strong civic solidarity and, through Athenian wealth, into military might. But inner ethnicity was also fairly flexible in the Greek world. It could be manipulated for political reasons through myths and other ideological tools, and prestige was an important element in making people *want* to be Athenians, Spartans or Corinthians.

The importance of such inner solidarity is also apparent in scientific, artistic and literary developments that are often sponsored by the state, its rulers or other influential persons. In the case of medieval Iceland, it was instrumental in creating significant cultural achievements (see chapter 7), but in the case of Greece, however, assigning the flourishing of culture solely to the direct effects of competition between states would be simplistic. The loosening of social restrictions inherent in the democratization process was certainly also very important, along with wealth, foreign contacts and city life, especially in Athens.

External prestige, usually based both on military and cultural reputation, was no less important. Much Athenian power was based on fame earned in the Persian wars, when the city took the lead in warding off alien aggression. This allowed Athens to create the Delian league of several Greek city-states designed to counter the Persian threat, which later developed into an Athenian maritime empire. External prestige made others more amiable towards the city and more willing to maintain friendly relations with it or even become part of its empire. The downside was that it could also cause envy and rivalry that frequently found an outlet in hostilities and war, as happened between Athens and Sparta in the Peloponnesian War of 431-404 BC.

Sparta's might was also based largely on reputation, but unlike that of Athens it was almost an exclusively military one. Sparta was

an anomaly in ancient Greece, as the Spartans were only a small minority in their own state where most of the population was composed of unfree *helots* and the free but disenfranchised *perioikoi* (neighbours). Originally just another Greek city-state, Sparta had, by its conquests, turned its entire free population into an aristocracy whose sole occupation was waging war and breeding warriors, activities necessitated by its brutal exploitation of the constantly disgruntled helots. As a result, the Spartans were ancient Greece's only substantial body of professional soldiers and as such could and did devote most of their time to perfecting their warrior skills. In this way, the Spartans became extremely efficient warriors and earned a well deserved reputation as such. It became common knowledge that no Greek state could compete with Sparta in land warfare, a reputation that stood them in good stead when it came to building alliances and intimidating enemies. These, in turn, were the principal means by which the Spartans asserted their influence, as further territorial acquisitions would only have made it more difficult to hold the subjugated population in check and were, therefore, impossible without profound social change.¹³

The indirect effects of prestige competition could be quite striking. It stimulated intellectual activity and could create a situation of unprecedented intellectual freedom capable of spawning the remarkable achievements of the ancient Greeks in the fields of literature, philosophy and science, particularly when coupled with the liberties inherent in the democratization process and a literate civilization.

Sparta, Athens and the other Greek city-states all depended a great deal on prestige, reputation and internal solidarity for their survival. In the final analysis, however, this type of competition is, like economic competition, only an indirect form of political competition, enhancing the polity's strength and chance of survival.

These categories of competition are not presented here because of some classification impulse, a common affliction among scholars that causes them to organize reality into tidy, discreet categories just for the fun of it. Rather they are a reminder that competition between polities is itself a complicated phenomenon.¹⁴ In the discussion that follows, little attention is given to all the nuances and details of competition, except for direct military competition. This is not due to some simplistic military determinism on my behalf but because in a general work like this, it is necessary to concentrate on the big picture. And for most of the three millennia dealt with here, war was undoubtedly the clearest, most important and least forgiving form of competition between polities.

The Greek Expansion

In Chapter 2 an Urnfield expansion cycle was outlined, prompted by military competition within a competitive system. In the Urnfield case, the competitive system and expansion cycle are both by necessity hypothetical, due to the lack of contemporary narrative sources. We identified three processes of expansion cycles: militarization, democratization and expansion. Ancient Greece also experienced an expansion cycle in which the processes are better known through being well represented in the source material, although their exact relationship is open to debate. The three processes are not really clearly demarcated time periods but rather represent a causal connection. Militarization leads to democratization, which in turn leads to expansion, but militarization does not stop just because democratization or even expansion has begun. All three processes can be, and usually are, going on at the same time.

The Militarization Process

Victor Davis Hanson has shown how Greek military innovations were connected with agrarian roots, and much of what I have to say in this section is based on his insights.¹⁵ The greatest military innovation of the ancient Greeks was the invention of the *hoplite* phalanx, a massed formation of heavily armed infantry with standardized equipment. The hoplite carried a large shield, bronze armour, helmet and greaves, a spear and a short sword. The complete *hoplite panoply* afforded excellent protection in a massed battle but could weigh as much as 30 kilos, rendering the hoplite clumsy and vulnerable when fighting alone. But he had no intention of fighting alone. Hoplitēs always fought in a phalanx, a massed formation usually eight shields deep, and their battles involved two such opposing phalanxes clashing head on and pushing, shoving and stabbing until one or the other broke. The hoplite phalanx constituted a major breakthrough in infantry warfare. Other contemporary forms of infantry were of little use against it, and their armour and close formation provided excellent protection against cavalry attacks.

The competitive system that must have emerged before the 8th century BC should have caused the polities to invest more and more in their war-making capabilities, at the same time as it encouraged them to develop more efficient forms of government, ultimately leading to the creation of the city-states. Prior to this, it seems that warfare was mainly the realm of the elite and consisted of light cavalry skirmishes. If a larger segment of the population could be used efficiently in war, this obviously increased the chances of victory. At the same time, however, it would necessarily require the

development of infantry tactics, since horses were rare and expensive and not generally available except to the elite. But infantry is vulnerable to cavalry attacks from which it can usually best defend itself by maintaining a close formation, and this was no doubt the origin of the Greek phalanx. By staying close together the infantry could out-compete the cavalry and the outcome of subsequent wars was increasingly determined by the clash of massed infantry phalanxes in which improving armament and organization was a survival trait. This produced the hoplite phalanx around 700 BC but the militarization process must have started much earlier, perhaps as early as the 9th century. In the end it involved all available citizens and turned the free male population of the Greek states into citizen-soldiers, amateur warriors that could be called upon whenever the need arose.

The development of the hoplite phalanx is usually dated to ca. 725 – 675 BC but it must have been preceded by a period during which infantry tactics were being gradually evolved. It is sometimes assumed on the grounds of the dating of direct evidence that the hoplite panoply was created before it was used in the phalanx. But, as Hanson has shown, this does not make any sense.¹⁶ It is completely illogical to assume that the hoplite panoply was developed before there was any use for it. As it was only effective within the phalanx, some kind of phalanx must therefore predate the panoply. This early phalanx was not necessarily identical to the classic hoplite phalanx that evolved over time with the hoplite panoply. Little is known about Greek warfare in the late Dark Age and the beginning of the Archaic period (ca. 900-700 BC) but during this time, fighting in close formation or phalanx must have been developed and it appears that infantry gradually grew in importance at the expense of cavalry. The development of the hoplite phalanx, with its heavy armour, was only the culmination of this process, at which time the Greeks almost ceased using cavalry at all.

The hoplites were not elite warriors. Except in Sparta, where the whole male population consisted of professionals, the hoplites were part time warriors, citizens called upon to defend their city. They had to provide their own equipment, which could be expensive, and were therefore mostly men of comfortable means, neither the poorest nor the richest, perhaps a third of the free adult male population.¹⁷ Most were farmers working their own land with their families and perhaps a couple of slaves. Later on, at least in Athens, militarization proceeded even further with the construction of a fleet operated mostly by citizens who were too poor to be able to afford the hoplite

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panoply. With the advent of the Athenian fleet in the 5th century BC, even poor citizens acquired military importance, as is described below.

The Democratization Process

There is a general agreement among ancient writers and, increasingly, modern scholars that hoplite warfare, based on the middling farmer, was fundamental to the democratization of ancient Greece. Democratization does not necessarily mean the emergence of fully fledged democracies such that of 5th century Athens. Rather, it means a power-shift from the traditional elite to a much wider segment of the population and can be represented by many and various governmental forms. It need not even incur any formal change in government if the king, state or ruling elite is forced to take more notice than before of the demands of the general population.

Democratization was an ongoing process in Archaic and Classical Greece. As the city-states emerged in the 8th century, their government was usually oligarchic (rule of the few, without a king) and they were dominated by the land-owning aristocracy. However, as time passed, the influence of the assembly of adult male citizens grew and by the end of the 6th century, the assembly usually had the ultimate decision-making power, even in the oligarchies.¹⁸

The democratization process basically brought power to the hoplite class in ancient Greece in accordance with its military importance. As they were mostly propertied farmers, the hoplites had a stabilizing effect, as they had much to lose by civic upheaval. At the same time, however, they guarded their interests jealously from the aristocracy.

Hanson sees the development of the hoplite class as a result of a growing population that had to be accommodated using relatively small plots of marginal land rendered productive by the introduction of olives and viticulture, as well as dividing up land previously used as pasture for aristocratic herds.¹⁹ However, the question remains as to what caused the population to grow, an issue on which Hanson has no good answer. Here I must detach myself from Hanson's excellent work, and suggest that the rising importance of the hoplites was due rather to the militarization process that was already going on before the hoplite breakthrough around 700 BC, and ultimately the fierce competition within the system. As the leaders of Greek communities and the emerging city-states of the 9th and 8th centuries BC discovered that they could make much better military use of common foot-soldiers by amassing them into closely packed phalanxes, a kind of arms race began. The better equipped the phalanx members, the more effective the phalanx and it was therefore imperative for the ruling elite to maximize the size of their phalanxes and ensure that they

3. The Cities of Greece

were well equipped. Because equipment was expensive, the number of phalanx members that any given community could conceivably provide was limited but, in order to survive in a competitive environment, the emerging state had to come as close to this number as possible. Thus, a city had to create a hoplite class even if none existed before.

While we don't know exactly how this happened, there are several possibilities. The heavily armed infantry may have originated as retainers of the aristocrats, rewarded for their services by plots of land from the aristocratic estate, or they may have been farmers drafted into the phalanx and ordered to bring their own equipment. Whatever the case, no city-state could afford to ignore the interests of the emerging hoplite class since its very existence depended on them. If the class was allowed to decline, this would result in a reduced ability of the state to defend itself, and ignoring the hoplites' demands was dangerous in any case as they could then turn their formidable military power against their own aristocracy. In this way, the militarization process created a class of heavily armed infantrymen which gradually increased in importance to become the hoplites of both military and political significance. Unlike Hanson, I see population growth as a result of this process but not as its root cause.

As mentioned before, democratization does not necessarily lead to democracies. In ancient Greece it sometimes even led to a form of government we commonly regard as the very opposite of democracy, the dictatorship of one man. The Greeks called this *tyranny*, but did not necessarily attach to it the negative meaning it has today. Tyranny in Greece was often a form of revolutionary government, supposedly implemented on behalf of the lower classes and directed against the oligarchies. It is therefore of the same nature as Bonapartism in 19th century France, under which the autocrat assumed total power, justified as being beneficial to the common people. Even the *dictatorships of the proletariat* in the communist countries of the 20th century fall into this same class of dictatorial government, justified as a revolutionary government on behalf of the people directed against the old elite. These can all be called *bonapartist* governments in a wider sense, and despite appearances, they were all symptomatic of a democratization process.

In some Greek city-states, Athens being the best known, the democratization process went all the way towards creating a democratic government with the theoretically equal participation of all male citizens, even the poorest.²⁰ Not surprisingly, this appears to be connected to a military development that made even the poor important. In the 5th century BC, Athens rose as a major maritime

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power in the Mediterranean, through its wealth and trade. To guard their empire, the Athenians constructed a huge fleet of triremes; galley-like warships that were the epitome of the naval warfare of the time. Unlike many later Mediterranean galleys, the oars of the triremes were not manned by slaves but by free citizens, generally those too poor to be able to afford the hoplite panoply. Therefore, the great fleet could not operate without the consent of the poor citizens. If they refused to man the oars – as they sometimes did to make a point – the fleet became inoperable. Through the fleet, and also the generally increasing significance of light armed troops after the Persian invasions, even the lowest segment of the free population gained some militarily importance which translated into political influence culminating in the development of full democracy in Athens.²¹

The militarization process perhaps started as early as the 9th century BC but made its breakthrough around 700 BC with the advent of the hoplite phalanx and continued throughout the Classical Age, reinforced by the growing importance of naval warfare. This process increased the significance of the common foot-soldier, which in turn induced a democratization process that probably began not much later than the militarization process but did not translate into fundamental changes in government until the 6th century, culminating in the 5th with the appearance of true democracy.

The Expansion Process

The British Monty Python gang was famous for its zany humour and its fans will remember a scene from their 1983 film *The Meaning of Life* in which a Catholic working class father comes home to his wife and innumerable children. As he enters, his wife, standing by the stove, gives birth to another child, almost without noticing, thus adding to the dozens of unkempt brats that fill every nook and cranny of the house. The father brings the bad news that they will be forced to sell their children for scientific experiments because they can no longer afford to feed them, all because of the Catholic disapproval of contraceptives that forces them to breed irrationally. The whole neighbourhood, nuns and corpses included, then ends up dancing and singing “Every sperm is sacred”. This is a fine example of Python silliness but just how silly is it? Do people without contraceptives really breed irrationally?

It is now time to introduce the Malthus-Boserup debate on the dynamics of population growth.²² The British economist Thomas Robert Malthus published his ideas on demographics more than 200 years ago.²³ Essentially, they were mainly a scholarly presentation of very old ideas about how any population tends to increase until it

reaches what modern scholars usually call *carrying capacity*, which is the number of people that the land can support given the current productive technologies.²⁴ In other words, Malthus believed that humans bred irrationally – although not quite as irrationally as portrayed by Monty Python – right up to the point where they could no longer be fed. When this limit was reached, the population was cut down through what Malthus called *positive checks*, by which he meant primarily famine.²⁵ Famine has killed a lot of people in human history but nowhere nearly as many as pestilence, so it is therefore quite strange that Malthus either largely ignored the latter as a major factor in controlling population or confused it with the former as a positive check. While it is quite true that good general health, of which adequate nutrition is an essential part, often makes people more resistant to infectious diseases, the prime cause of epidemics is not hunger or malnutrition but pathogens: bacteria and viruses. The formation and spread of such killers as bubonic plague, smallpox, influenza or AIDS has little or nothing to do with how much people have to eat and are therefore, not caused by the land reaching its ‘carrying capacity’. This is important because epidemics overall have caused many times more deaths in human history than hunger. What’s more, their effects have generally been more devastating and longer lasting, killing not only the weak and infirm, as do most famines but otherwise healthy and productive people in the prime of their lives. While a greater population density may limit population growth through an increased danger of disease due to unsanitary conditions and because there are more people to infect, this has nothing to do with the food supply.²⁶

Malthus’ ideas do seem to make sense when we are dealing with animal populations (although even they can succumb to killing epidemics), which are totally dependent on what nature gives. However, they trivialize the fundamental change in the human condition that occurred with agriculture, when people started to actively produce their food instead of just picking it up or chasing it down. With the development of agriculture, people could actually produce more food through their own labour. On the whole, Malthus underestimated the effectiveness of factors other than famine in controlling population, including pestilence and social limitations on births, as well as the capacity of food production to keep up with population growth.

Malthus’ ideas reigned largely unchallenged until 1965, when another economist, Esther Boserup, published her ideas.²⁷ Boserup, more or less, turned Malthus on his head. Where Malthusians saw advances in productive technologies as a precondition for raising

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carrying capacity and thereby allowing population growth, Boserup used population growth to explain social, economic and technological changes. When the population is growing, people seek new ways to accommodate their increased numbers and change the economy accordingly or invent new technologies. More productive methods of food production are in fact not required until population pressure is felt. In pre-industrial times, making land produce more usually resulted in an increased workload for the farmer and his family. In other words, there was an inverse relationship between the productivity of land and the productivity of labour. The more food a plot of land was made to produce, the harder the cultivators had to work for each of their meals.²⁸ Of course they saw no reason to make their lives more difficult until they had to. Only when they had more mouths to feed were they induced to increase the productivity of the land and were forced to accept the lowered productivity of their labour in the process. Malthusian demographics would view the increased productivity of land as a precondition for population growth but fail to explain why people would want to lessen the productivity of their labour by increasing the productivity of their land before they had more mouths to feed. If population growth in a given territory is not mechanically determined by food production technologies, it follows that it must be determined by various other factors, such as social reproduction patterns, land distribution and pestilence.²⁹

Hanson, quite correctly in my view, sees population growth in ancient Greece in Boserupian terms but the causes of the population growth remain a mystery to him. Sometimes he connects them to a change in family patterns, which in turn is both unverified and unexplained.³⁰ I would suggest an alternative explanation based on the model of expansion cycles. According to this, militarization, spurred on by competition, is the first step of the process, with population growth coming later as a part of the expansion process.

In the 8th century BC, we see the beginning of a remarkable growth in population in Greece which spilled over into a colonizing movement that saw Greeks spread far and wide along the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and lasted until the 6th century. As has already been observed, there is no agreement as to the causes of this expansion but it does seem to be connected with a shift in farming away from pastoralism to crops such as grain, olives and wine. By its nature, the growing of crops entails a much more intensive use of land than does pastoralism. All the food we consume is ultimately derived from plants that harness the sun's energy through photosynthesis. Pastoralists use plant resources through an intermediary, livestock, which convert them into milk and meat,

loosing most of the energy in the process. It therefore stands to reason that consuming plants represents a much more efficient use of land than using it for pasture. On the other hand, raising livestock is usually much less trouble than growing crops, and farming populations in the past therefore tended to emphasize animal husbandry when land was plentiful but reverted to crop growing when it became scarce. It is not without reason that a connection is often made between the Greek expansion and the shift from pastoralism to crop growing that accompanied it.³¹

A Malthusian interpretation of this connection would be that the shift 'allowed' a rise in population but this certainly does not explain why the population growth spilled over in a colonization movement. A more sensible Boserupian interpretation would be that population growth was the cause of the shift to more intensive land use as people strove to support more mouths on the same land. Therefore, the population growth, along with the intensive agriculture and the colonization movement that followed from it, must be explained by something else.

We have already seen how the militarization of late Dark Age and early Archaic Age Greece (ca. 900-650) resulted in the rise of infantry, culminating in the hoplite phalanx. Warfare was no longer the prerogative of the horse-riding elite but the business of the common man, and the common man was above all else a farmer. We have also seen how militarization led to the enfranchisement of the common man, at least those who could afford military equipment. It then stands to reason that the aristocracy had to grant them some of their wishes right from the start.

What does a farmer want? What a Greek farmer wanted above all else was probably the same as his Urnfield predecessor; a piece of land he could call his own.³² In most agrarian societies in European history, access to land was more or less a precondition of being able to start a family and have children. Without land, this was almost impossible except for those few who found employment as artisans, merchants or (sometimes) in the service of the rich. The excess population, which could not acquire its own land, was doomed to an existence of dependency and celibacy, even slavery.³³ All agrarian societies in Europe had the potential for very rapid population growth if the excess population could somehow be accommodated and allowed to procreate. It is also quite reasonable to explain the population explosion of Archaic Greece in this way. The excess population, or large parts of it, was freed from its life of celibacy and allowed to procreate. Other explanations are, in fact, hard to come by.

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How did this happen? We have none of the details and few of the facts, but there is an obvious connection to the militarization and democratization processes.³⁴ It is probable that this was a combination of two tendencies. Firstly, there was the desire of the ruling aristocracy for more foot soldiers to use in their competition against other emerging city-states. This could lead them to grant some of their extensive and under-utilized lands to their foot soldiers, in return for military service, also enabling them to acquire the necessary military equipment. This constant competition would ensure that more and more land was divided up as the demand grew for more soldiers. It may also be that the aristocracy realized that more independent farmers meant a faster reproduction rate, thus creating more soldiers for the future.

The second tendency would have been the natural desire of an agrarian population for more land, not only for itself but also for its children and grandchildren. As the agrarian class became more influential through the democratization process, it had a better chance of carrying through its demands, while the availability of new land would have created a reproduction pattern in which more people were able to marry and have children. The landless were no longer resigned to a life of celibacy but expected and demanded land for themselves.³⁵ Given the new power of the people, it was difficult for the aristocracy to resist the agrarian demands and the solution, agreeable to all, was often the establishment of colonies. In this way the aristocracy could hold on to much of its lands without severely antagonizing the agrarian class.

The colonization movement began shortly before 700 BC and ended around 500 BC. During this time the Greeks built new cities along the shores of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, many of which were destined to enjoy a long and prosperous life. The modern cities of Marseilles, Naples, Taranto, Syracuse and Istanbul all began life as Greek colonies during the Archaic period. In the end, the population of Greece stopped growing and stabilized. As the land filled up and more and more marginal land was brought into use, it must have gradually dawned on the farmers that there was no more land for the taking and that a return to earlier reproduction patterns was inevitable. The result was fewer children and de facto economic restrictions on marriage and the reappearance of a landless class that was hardly able to reproduce.

The End of the Greek System

The Greek state system lasted until the Macedonian conquest in the late 4th century but by that time the expansion cycle had long since spent itself. Militarization had probably already begun in the 9th century BC, reaching a height with the hoplites who dominated Greek battlefields from the 7th to the 5th century BC. Following the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), however, military developments took a different turn with an increased emphasis on light troops, especially the so called *peltast*, and mercenaries. The first traces of democratization must have already appeared in the 8th century BC, and later spawned the development of tyrannies, restricted oligarchies and democracies that lasted beyond the end of the classical period. The expansion phase commenced shortly after democratization but was over by the end of the 6th century BC. All the phases of the Greek expansion cycle were, therefore, taking place at the same time about 700-500 BC, but the competitive system lasted beyond the expansion cycle, continuing to innovate militarily, politically, socially and, not least, intellectually.

For almost two hundred years during the 7th and 6th centuries BC, hoplite warfare reigned supreme in Greece. During that time it changed only slowly. The Greeks had hit upon a formula that suited them well and its connection with agrarianism ensured a certain stability. As farmers could not spend time in a protracted war when fields needed to be ploughed, grain sown, crops tended or olives and wine harvested, warfare was essentially a seasonal activity characterized by a desire for a quick solution, often through a head-on clash in a single battle. The hoplites were certainly the culmination of the militarization of the Greek expansion cycle, but they then settled into a system of warfare that became relatively stable until the Persian invasions.

When the Persians made their attempt to conquer Greece in the invasions of 492-490 and 480-479 BC they introduced elements of war that were unfamiliar to the Greeks but to which they had to respond. One of these elements was the arrival a large fleet from Phoenicia that was used to dominate sea routes, move troops around and supply the army. Another was the use of unfamiliar kinds of fighting men, such as cavalry, light troops, archers and skirmishers. A third was a sustained war effort unhampered by agricultural activity. The army remained in the field for prolonged periods of time, and this necessitated logistic support. Thus, the Persian invasions served as catalysts of change in Greek warfare, although the Greeks managed to repel them.³⁶ At the same time, the presence of the Persians and

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their occupation of Greek territory gave the Greek competitive system something of the character of periphery systems (as described on p. 14 above). During this time, competition in Greece was not primarily between Greek city-states but rather with the Persians, as the Greeks frantically tried to find ways of surviving the onslaught of the greatest empire the Western World had ever seen. As we shall see in some Roman conquests (chapter 5), competitive systems can be conquered by great empires but if they survive the initial attack they stand a good chance of resisting assimilation and devising ways of coping with the threat and even finally to counterattack and destroy the alien empire. This, very briefly, describes the essence of both Greco-Persian relations and Romano-German relations as outlined in chapter 6.

Hoplite tactics had proved effective against the Persians and continued to be used for a long time, but were now supplemented by new elements. Athens and other maritime city-states built large fleets financed mainly from public funds, which constituted a state expenditure on war on a scale unheard of before. Their warships, the triremes, had to be manned by the poor who could not afford the hoplite panoply, so furthering their military and political power and encouraging the development of democracies. Light troops became increasingly common, particularly during and after the Peloponnesian War, and, as the hoplite farmer could not and would not spend all his time making war, there was an increasing tendency to rely on mercenaries. By the 4th century BC the ideal of the citizen-soldier had become much eroded. The Greeks were moving away from popular warfare to a warfare run and financed by the state and conducted by professionals. As a consequence, democracy became somewhat muted.³⁷ This was probably inevitable given the way that warfare evolved in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, with the Greeks having to contend with large states using professional armies. However, it also spelled the end of the Greek state system as first the Macedonians and later the Romans with their greater resources and population began to interfere.

At the same time we find some indications of increased social stratification. In some parts of Greece, landholdings were being gathered into larger estates and Polybius believed that, in his time (2nd century BC), the population of Greece was declining because people were refraining from marrying and having children.³⁸ Both of these conditions may be indicative of a departure from an expansion cycle, with a growing social elite and fewer opportunities for the young (i.e. *elitization* – see chapter 4). On the other hand, the evidence is somewhat conflicting and it may well be that these

processes were still not general or prominent in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC.³⁹

The Greeks had made huge strides in the development of all aspects of civilization. In the end, the benefits were reaped by their neighbours the Macedonians and the Romans. Both of these empires originated on the edges of the Greek world and were heavily influenced by Greek civilization even to the point of copying the Greek phalanx but developing it according to their own preferences. The Macedonian kingdom was larger than any Greek city-state and thus had far greater resources and manpower. As the Macedonians became infused with Greek civilization they developed a larger and stronger state than any in Greece proper. They were also 'blessed' with a more archaic social structure, including a strong nobility that traditionally served as cavalry. In the military meltingpot that was Greece and its neighbours in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, it were the Macedonians that emerged as the strongest, combining traditions and lessons gleaned from Greece and Persia and adding a few innovations of their own.⁴⁰ In the latter half of the 4th century BC, this allowed them to become world conquerors – first dominating the Greeks and uniting them and then, under the leadership of Alexander, unleashing their combined military power on the Persian Empire, which fell with remarkable ease.

The rise of Macedonia is symptomatic of a recurrent phenomenon that often accompanies competitive systems. On their borders, where the competition is often less severe but the innovations of the system are still well known and used, there frequently appear what we can call *frontier empires*.⁴¹ These emerging empires benefit by their proximity to the system but, because of their peripheral position, are not restricted by the balancing mechanisms that prevent any one of the central polities from growing too strong. They start their growth outside the system where its superiority is felt and there is less resistance. The Macedonians only became important players in the Greek system after they had used what they had learned from the Greeks to expand into barbarian Europe. After subjugating Thracians, Illyrians and others, they turned their increased might against Greece.⁴² As we shall see, frontier empires are common appendages to competitive systems and often spelled their end when they turned against the system that begat them.⁴³ But they are only a phenomenon of competitive systems in situations in which statehood has developed, such as in Greece or the European system. Barbarian systems, for as long as they remained barbarian (i.e. stateless), were free from the danger of stimulating the growth of an empire on their margins. The reason is simple. Frontier empires arose because they

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were able to expand and integrate large territories, and this required the superior organization of a state. Just as Macedonia rose as a frontier empire to the Greek system, Rome perhaps first emerged as a frontier empire to the Etruscan system and later to the Hellenistic one (chapter 5). More recently, the European system begat both America and Russia on its fringes (chapter 9).

These frontier empires sometimes developed a kind of mutualistic relationship between the state and the warrior farmers that fuelled both population growth and political expansion. The resulting expansion bears a striking resemblance to a typical expansion cycle, with warrior farmers, population growth and a tendency towards popular power. However, there are also striking differences, the most obvious one being that this expansion is driven by a single state but not a state system. The presence of a strong state also means that democratization is often muted or even invisible, as the agrarian population, on which the army is founded, is kept relatively content through its access to newly conquered lands. The prime example of this kind of *empire expansion* is the Roman expansion (chapter 5) but it probably also played a part in American expansion into the West (chapter 9), Macedonian expansion, and even Russian expansion into Siberia, although the two latter examples are not discussed specifically in this book.

The Greeks got off relatively easily from their run-in with the Macedonians, simply because the Macedonians had a bigger fish to fry in the form of the Persian Empire. The real ambition of Alexander and his father, Philip, was not to conquer or rule Greece but the whole of Persia and they wanted the Greeks as partners more than subjects in this undertaking. Consequently, most of the Greek states preserved a certain autonomy under Macedonian domination and benefited greatly from the conquests.

The Hellenistic World

The empire of Alexander was short lived and soon broke up into a number of kingdoms ruled by Macedonian kings and a Greco-Macedonian upper class. In the twists and turns of the next century and a half, the Greek cities often held on to their autonomy within the Hellenic, Aitolian and Achaean Leagues, but they became decidedly small players in the world of Hellenistic power politics that characterized the eastern Mediterranean in the 3rd century BC. The successor states, the Macedonian kingdoms of the Hellenistic world,

may have constituted a short-lived competitive system of the eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁴

After Alexander's death in 323 BC, his empire was without a strong heir and there followed a chaotic period when his generals, the Diadochi (successors), scuffled for influence and power. The imperial ideal was finally laid to rest at the battle of Ipsus in 301 BC and Alexander's empire split into rivalling kingdoms fighting frequent wars with large mercenary armies. The Hellenistic world that emerged was made up of three principal kingdoms and several lesser states that together covered all of the eastern Mediterranean and, at least in the beginning, stretched considerably into the Asian hinterland. The three principal players were Macedonia, the Seleucid kingdom in Western Asia and the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt. This state system was larger than any previous competitive system in the Western World and would not be surpassed until the emergence of the European system in the Middle Ages (chapter 8). Only the sea routes of the Mediterranean allowed it to maintain some cohesiveness, but the common culture and identity that usually holds such systems together was still very superficial. The system was held together by the Greek language and culture spread by Macedonian conquests. Some progress was made in disseminating them to the indigenous populations of Asia and Egypt during the lifespan of the successor kingdoms but the job was never completed. Greek was the language of the cities and the upper class but the rural population still communicated in their local dialects and often reacted violently to the attempts of Hellenistic rulers to force their culture upon them, the most spectacular example being the Maccabean uprising in Palestine of the 2nd century BC. If the upper class of the system shared a common outer or Hellenistic identity, it can hardly be said that this also applied to the general population of the Seleucid or Ptolemaic kingdoms, even if some integration occurred.⁴⁵

The states of the system were artificial constructs based on geography and the power politics of the turmoil following Alexander's death. In the case of Ptolemaic Egypt, this happened to coincide with a previously existing ethnic identity, but nothing of the sort applied to the Seleucid kingdom which was a mosaic of disparate Semitic and Indo-European populations that hardly shared an inner identity congruent with the state, let alone an outer one with the Hellenistic system.

The Hellenistic states certainly competed with each other, especially through warfare, and they did share important elements of culture and technology. However, of the six characteristics of competitive systems listed above (pp. 61-63) three are rather

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problematic. It was a large system, which makes for inefficient competition (condition 3), although contact over the Mediterranean did help. But there are also serious problems assigning a similar social structure, culture and economy (condition 4) or a dual identity (condition 5) to the system, except to a thin upper layer.

The Hellenistic system is perhaps best described as a competitive system in the making. Although it only lasted for a century and a half, had it been allowed to evolve on its own terms, it may very well have become a truly effective competitive system. Hellenistic civilization is sometimes described in terms of a decline from the civilization of Classical Greece. This is probably unfair, since many scholars, historians and philosophers continued to work and write in Hellenistic times and produce novel technologies and original ideas. In most respects, Hellenistic civilization was vibrant and innovative, with a free exchange of ideas throughout. It may not have developed its true potential as a competitive system but this was probably due to its premature demise at the hands of the Romans.

By 200 BC, the Romans had defeated the Carthaginians and emerged as the supreme power in the western and central Mediterranean and increasingly dominated its entire littoral. From this time on, they began encroaching on the Hellenistic system. There are many similarities between the rise of Rome in the Hellenistic world and the rise of Macedonia in the world of Classical Greece, and both can be described as frontier empires to these systems.⁴⁶ In 190 BC, the Romans inflicted a devastating defeat on the Seleucids at Magnesia in Asia Minor that so crippled their kingdom that it began to shrink uncontrollably, not least from the east under the advance of the nomadic Parthians. In 146 BC, two years after annexing Macedonia, the Romans permanently occupied the Greek homeland at the same time as they finally destroyed Carthage. From this time on we can hardly speak of a Hellenistic system. What remained were states that came increasingly under the domination of the rising superpower of the west but also crumbled from attacks from the east. Over the next century or so, the last remains of Hellenism were incorporated into the Roman Empire.

Like the Macedonians before them, the Romans benefited from inclusion in the wider Greek (and Hellenistic) world and carried on Greek traditions in their own civilization. As they conquered the Mediterranean basin and a large part of continental Europe, they carried the combined Greco-Roman civilization far and wide. In no small part was their empire a successor to Greek civilization, even if it was a world empire and thus antithetical to the Greek competitive system and even the Hellenistic one. A wonderful time ensued, a

world benefiting both from the achievements of the Greeks and the peace and prosperity brought by the Roman Empire. But somehow, the dynamism that characterized the ancient competitive systems was slowly washed away.

¹ Drews (1988), pp. 38-41 (basing his argument on the work of Ernst Risch).

² Hall (1997), p. 181 (also pp. 143-181).

³ Pomeroy et al. (1999), p. 58.

⁴ Pomeroy et al. (1999), pp. 84-85.

⁵ Pomeroy et al. (1999), pp. 79-80. Hall (2000), pp. 138-139. Georganas (2002), pp. 295-296.

⁶ See Georganas (2002) and especially Hall (1997).

⁷ The Homeric epics and the poems of Hesiod (ca. 700 BC) display a preoccupation with conflict and competition, not only their negative sides but also their ability to spur improvement, and how to channel 'strife' (*eris*) into the ability to engage a common foe. This seems very appropriate at a time when states were emerging that sought to minimize internal strife but were engaged in escalating conflicts with each other. See Thalmann (2004).

⁸ Wesson 1978, pp. 31-32. Griffith & Thomas (1981), pp. 191, 197.

⁹ According to Thucydides VIII, 57. See also Wesson (1978), p. 32.

¹⁰ Pomeroy et al. (1999), pp. 78-79.

¹¹ Clausewitz I, 24.

¹² Cherry (1986).

¹³ Pomeroy et al. (1999), pp. 131-158. Note also the possibility of a Spartan *Napoleon Syndrome* for explaining its special place in the Greek system, see p. 283.

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of various expressions of competition in ancient Greece, e.g. in temple building, see Snodgrass (1986).

¹⁵ Hanson (1995) and (2000).

¹⁶ Hanson (1995), pp. 230-231.

¹⁷ Snodgrass (1986), p. 52.

¹⁸ Pomeroy et al. (1999), pp. 87-89. See also Thomas (1981), pp. 38, 63.

¹⁹ Hanson (1995), pp. 37-41.

²⁰ Of course, Athenian democracy excluded women, slaves and alien residents. We can hardly expect the ancient Greeks to conform to modern ideas of human rights.

²¹ Pomeroy et al. (1999), p. 201. Hanson (1995), pp. 365-369. Also the ancients were aware of this connection, see Aristotle, *Politics* V,4; VI,7.

²² Lee (1986), Axel Kristinsson (2000).

²³ Malthus (1826). First published 1798.

²⁴ On carrying capacity see e.g. Demeny (1989).

²⁵ Actually, Malthus was not blind to the effects of the social means of restricting population growth and called them *preventive checks* (preventing births) as opposed to his more drastic *positive checks* (death). However, he assumed that preventive checks were never sufficient to stop the population growing beyond the means of subsistence, at which point positive checks (usually famine or pestilence) cut down the population (Malthus, 1826,

especially chapters 3-5). History has, of course, proved Malthus wrong on this point since the population of most Western countries has now stabilized or is even decreasing solely through social limitations of births (assisted by modern contraceptives).

²⁶ Crosby (1986), pp. 29-31. McNeill (1979), pp. 46, 62-63.

²⁷ Boserup (1993).

²⁸ Boserup (1993), pp. 35-55.

²⁹ See also Axel Kristinsson (2000). A perceptive reader will realize that this means that the production of surplus food required to support specialists and a social elite was technologically possible from the beginning of agriculture. The presence of such social groups was not determined by technological improvements in productive methods but rather by social conditions that induced farmers to produce more than they needed for themselves and then part with it. See Carneiro (1970), pp. 733-34.

³⁰ Hanson (1995), pp. 37-38.

³¹ See Hanson (1995), pp. 41.

³² An intriguing glimpse into the world of the early Greek farmer can be seen in Hesiod's poem *Work and Days* (ca 700 BC). See also Hanson (1995), pp. 91-126.

³³ Jones (1981), pp. 12-16. Herlihy (1985), pp. 142-145. See also chapter 8, section 3, below.

³⁴ See also Thomas (1981), p. 39.

³⁵ All sons generally shared in the inheritance of their father, resulting in a tendency to split farms into smaller parcels or to claim new lands. Hanson (1995), p. 146.

³⁶ Hanson (1995), p. 338.

³⁷ Shipley (2000), pp. 128-130.

³⁸ Polybius XXXVI, 17. Of course, he attributes this to a moral decline but we don't have to take that too seriously.

³⁹ Shipley (2000), pp. 30-31, 56, 98-100.

⁴⁰ Ferrill (1985), pp. 175-86.

⁴¹ This term is partially borrowed from McNeill (1984, pp. 147-148), who uses *march states* in much the same sense. Even if frontier empires were always state polities (below), I feel that the term *empire* describes them better since, as I use the term, they were not just any state that happened to be located on the margins of the system but only those that actively expanded beyond it. Similar ideas have been expressed by others, such as Robert Wesson (1967, pp. 1-12).

⁴² Shipley (2000), pp. 109-116.

⁴³ See also Wesson (1978) pp. 36-40.

⁴⁴ Wesson (1978) discusses the Hellenistic world as one of his state systems.

⁴⁵ Shipley (2000), pp. 259-261.

⁴⁶ For a further discussion on the rise of Rome, see chapter 5.

4. THE GAULS

We have a tendency to think that barbarian societies were rather static and that nothing much changed for long periods of time. But just because we don't know what was going on doesn't mean that nothing was, a lesson brought forcefully home by the recurrent explosions of peoples. Urnfielders, Gauls, Germans, Slavs and Vikings all demonstrate that barbarian Europe was not just a stagnant backwater but a dynamic area no less a decisive part of European history than the civilized Mediterranean.

The Urnfield expansion is not well known except through archaeology, but by the time of the Gauls we are better informed through literary sources. The Gallic expansion, therefore, serves as a kind of prototype for barbarian expansions, especially since it was relatively unhindered by the presence of civilized empires and states. Our information on Gallic expansion still relies heavily on archaeology, but the literary supplement is often crucial.

Our model of an expansion cycle indicates three processes that constitute the cycle: militarization, democratization and expansion (pp. 46-53 above). These processes are sometimes hard to detect directly when information is limited, but there are certain symptoms that indicate expansion cycles, the most important of which are listed below.

- 1) The presence of a competitive system. This is a usual precondition for typical (*system*) expansion cycles. However, there are some 'atypical' ones that do not seem to be directly connected with competitive systems, such as the Roman expansion (chapter 5).
- 2) Militarization process. Symptoms: military innovation, popular armies.
- 3) Democratization process. Symptoms: relative social and political equality.
- 4) Expansion process. Symptoms: initial population growth and intensification of agriculture followed by territorial expansion. However, at some point during the expansion the population may drop and agriculture become less intensive locally as whole tribes or peoples abandon their homes for better prospects, or if the unsettled conditions of the expansion cycle prove to be particularly destructive.

A quick review of the ancient Greek expansion cycle easily confirms all these indicators (chapter 4). While much less is known about the Gauls, the use of this model can help us stitch together the pieces of information available. Our main object here is to try to see how our information on the Gallic expansion fits the symptoms listed above.

The Celtic Predecessors

The first thing that must be made clear is that the idea of a common Celtic identity is a modern construct, brought about by linguistic research that showed a special affinity, albeit a remote one, between the old languages of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Brittany and ancient Gaul and Spain.¹ At some early date when these languages were spreading over large parts of Western and Central Europe, we may assume that there was some common identity among their speakers, but the spread of the Celtic languages is not well understood and appears to be a rather complex process occurring in many different episodes over centuries or millennia. As a result, there is little chance of a common Celtic identity persisting all this time. The expansion that began from around the upper Rhine in the 5th century BC was not a general Celtic expansion but involved only a part of the peoples we designate as such. These were the Gauls, who even if they are correctly classified as Celtic in a linguistic sense, probably did not identify with all the other peoples speaking Celtic languages, any more than they saw themselves as Indo-Europeans, another modern concept reflecting ancient but long forgotten linguistic unity.

All Gauls were Celts but not all Celts were Gauls.² Therefore, the expansion that is the subject of this chapter is better described by the term used for the expanding peoples rather than from a modern linguistic term that includes large populations who were not involved. The Gallic expansion of the 4th century BC is still often called Celtic, but I think this is unfortunate and should be discouraged. The term *Celtic* comes from Greek *keltoi* and was used by the Greeks for barbarian populations living in the vicinity of the Greek colony of Massilia – modern Marseilles in southern France – but was often used indiscriminately to describe any western barbarians.³ It is quite possible that the term originally applied to the people that modern archaeologists designate by the uninspiring term *Hallstatt C and D*. The late Hallstatt culture of the western Alps and the upper Danube and Rhone valleys emerged in the 8th century BC and seems to have constituted the culmination of a new trend towards elitism in

barbarian Europe, which gradually asserted itself in the wake of the Urnfield expansion.

Of course, the new elite in Europe was a warrior elite, and although we know little about its rise with any certainty, we can safely assume that it was greatly facilitated by a new kind of elite warfare, introduced to Europe in the early 1st millennium BC, which originated on the Eurasian steppes around 1000 BC. This was the first true cavalry.

Chariot warfare had received a deathblow in the catastrophe of 1200 BC but in spite of this, chariots remained in use in Europe throughout the 1st millennium BC, although apparently as prestige vehicles rather than due to being much use in warfare. The Assyrians, who seem to have sheltered Mesopotamia from the ravages of 1200 BC, continued to use chariots in warfare well into the 1st millennium. This is somewhat surprising, in the light of the fact that they also pioneered an alternative to chariots consisting of simply disposing of the chariot itself and instead putting the driver and warrior on horseback. The driver continued to control both horses so that the warrior could concentrate on firing his arrows. While sitting on horseback does not provide the Bowman with as stable a platform from which to fight as a chariot does, the advantage lay in the fact that this type of team was much less vulnerable. If one horse was incapacitated, the men could simply double up on the other one and make their escape.⁴

Horses had, of course, been used to pull chariots for some time and there is also evidence of horseback riding from an early date. But the use of riders was severely limited in early warfare by unsuitable horse breeds and ineffective riding gear, which made it difficult to control the horse and wield weapons at the same time. The chariot was an excellent solution to this problem but after 1200 BC, new solutions were required to make more efficient use of the horse and at the same time revive the effectiveness of elite warriors.

Although the Assyrians played their part in developing the new cavalry warfare, it actually reached Europe from the Pontic steppe. Involving the use of a saddle, an improved bridle and a larger breed of horses, the development of cavalry was instrumental in the rise of the steppe peoples from the late 2nd millennium onwards. They became expert horsemen and warriors who, for almost three thousand years, were to terrorise the more settled civilizations all around them, whether in Europe, the Near East, India or China. In the steppe environment, ideal for horse-breeding, true nomadism developed at the same time as cavalry warfare appeared. These people gave up their fixed homes in favour of tents or seasonal camps, depending

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from then on entirely on animal husbandry, for which the horse was absolutely essential. As a result, they became extremely mobile and their military worth was far greater than their numbers would indicate.

The steppe influence was first felt in Europe in the 11th century BC but intensified from the 9th century through a people identified as Cimmerians and climaxed with the Scythians during the 7th century BC.⁵ The path of the steppe influence in Europe was the same as reappeared several times afterwards, moving from the Pontic steppe to the Hungarian Plain, which geographically forms a sort of extension of the steppe inside Central Europe. From the Hungarian Plain, the nomadic warriors appear to have spread their dominance through raids over a wide swath of Central Europe. In European context, the appearance of mounted nomadic warriors amounted to elite warfare, since horses were much less common here than on the steppes, and this may have stimulated the growth of new elites or strengthened existing ones. The rise of a mounted elite could either be accomplished by the nomads setting themselves up as rulers over a conquered population or, perhaps more usually, by existing elites adopting the nomadic way of war in order to be able to counter the threat from the steppes, perhaps using nomadic mercenaries as an intermediate step.

The steppe influence seems to have reinforced the trend in the Hallstatt culture of the north Alpine region to become ever more hierarchic and in its later phases, the so-called Hallstatt C and D (from around 750-700 BC), there are clear signs of elite dominance.⁶ Hallstatt D is particularly interesting. Confined to the western part of the Hallstatt area and lasting from around 600 until shortly after 500 BC, this culture was characterized by large fortified princely centres, the most famous and probably earliest of which was the Heuneburg on the upper Danube but with several others, mostly appearing further west. These seem to have been the centres of highly stratified societies, distinguished by a warrior elite fighting on horseback. The exact political organization of the Hallstatt area is not clear to us, but may have been a kind of feudal monarchy, with strong local centres of power combined in an alliance or as vassals to a 'king'.⁷

The prevailing opinion of archaeologists on the rise and fall of Hallstatt D is that it is connected with trade routes from the Mediterranean.⁸ As this model is often applied to many other barbarian societies, it is therefore worthy of brief examination. It is assumed that access to rare and specific trade goods was the foundation of power in these societies. Those who controlled these goods and distributed them to their followers could use them to

enhance their power and build up client systems or even complicated hierarchies dominating large territories. Kingdoms or principalities were built on access to *prestige goods* such as wine-drinking equipment of ultimately Greek origin.⁹ It is also assumed that the supply of Mediterranean luxury items was so important to the barbarian 'periphery' that its interruption would cause their whole political organization to collapse.¹⁰

I must say that I find this hard to believe. While there is good evidence for an extensive exchange or trade network in the Hallstatt area, to see it as the foundation of the political hierarchy is speculative at best. And while it is quite true that political disruption often went hand in hand with interrupted trade, it seems more likely that political upheaval caused the cessation of trade rather than the other way round. In the modern world, international trade is of the greatest importance. It is through trade that states and societies realize their economic competition, but this is a relatively new phenomenon only appearing in the modern period and intensifying with the Industrial Revolution and the modernization process of the last two hundred years. In most pre-industrial societies, trade was of very limited importance, with only a small part of a farmer's produce entering into trade, most of which was local in any case. Long-distance trade was mainly confined to luxury items for the elite and of little or no interest to the general population. The general presence of luxury goods can certainly illuminate the socio-political hierarchy and help maintain it since elites everywhere emphasise their social position by expensive, rare and fashionable things. However, claiming that hierarchies depend on the supply of specific prestige goods seems to ignore the fact that one needs access to power or wealth in order to be able to acquire them in the first place. What is more, they have no intrinsic value, making them easily replaced by some other useless trinkets. It is much like saying that a modern status symbol, like a Rolex watch, somehow creates stratification instead of just displaying it. Moreover, it would mean that if for some reason Rolexes became unavailable, this would not just lead to other items taking their place but rather to the whole hierarchy coming tumbling down!

So why do so many archaeologists insist that the hierarchical structure of Hallstatt D and other cultures depended on the access of exotic imports from the Mediterranean? I suspect that the importance of trade in the modern world plays a part. We are used to thinking of international or long-distance trade as vitally important.¹¹ However, in agrarian societies it was the land that provided sustenance for almost everyone. Its possession and the relationship between cultivator and landlord must therefore have been of far greater overall

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economic importance. This is confirmed by our knowledge of the histories of ancient and medieval civilizations, where control and possession of land were universally the foundations of social stratification and power structures. Therefore, there is little reason to assume anything else for the non-literate societies of prehistoric agrarians.¹²

I also suspect that this preoccupation with trade reflects an embedded problem in archaeology. Some archaeologists have a tendency to overemphasize things as explanatory elements that, by their nature, are visible in the archaeological record, while those that are not visible are often neglected or undervalued. But material remains, the archaeologist's source material, only exhibit a limited slice of reality. They cannot provide a detailed picture of the workings of a society, and it is extremely difficult to discern the exact socio-economic situation based on nothing but grave goods and perhaps a few settlement remains. On the other hand, prestige goods are highly visible as they are physically found in the earth, and it must be tempting to use them to construct an image of prehistoric societies. One of the most striking features a historian notices when reading some archaeological interpretations of prehistoric societies is a tendency to explain social relationships in terms of a kind of *commodity fetishism*.¹³ Whereas most historical populations (according to written sources) lived in a world characterized by wealth, power, ideology and social relationships, one gets the feeling from some of the archaeological literature that the prehistoric world was different and controlled to a much greater degree by tangible commodities possessing arbitrary values. It is as though power and prestige in these societies were almost exclusively determined by the objects possessed, exchanged or carried on one's person and this was the only way that people could discern each other's social position. Conversely, things like wealth, lineage and reputation, all of which would have been well known in local circles, were of little concern. I suspect that this only reflects the preoccupation of some archaeologists with material objects, which they sometimes tend to transfer to the people they study.

Additionally, one of the things on which archaeology can throw some light is long-distance trade. This is because items brought from afar tend to stand out, and if their origin is known, trade or exchange linking the two areas is assumed.¹⁴ Local trade, on the other hand, is much harder to detect since the items involved tend not to stand out. Therefore, long-distance trade is one of the few elements that the archaeologist can confidently present and it must be tempting to use

it for explaining other elements that archaeology cannot illuminate with the same certainty.

It is questionable whether the prestige goods model for political hierarchy is actually valid for any society, and its application to the rise and fall of the Hallstatt culture is based on an extremely one-sided interpretation of the evidence.¹⁵ However difficult it may be, explanations of the Hallstatt culture should be sought in the socio-political processes going on in the Central European communities of the time, and not by arbitrarily assigning them a peripheral position vis-à-vis Mediterranean civilizations, thereby explaining most of what was going on as a reflection of the link between the *core* and the *periphery*.¹⁶ This idea is perhaps only a continuation of the old and dated ideology that saw as the main theme of history how the 'light of civilization' spread out from its 'origins', gradually bringing more and more barbarians into its glow and always looking at the barbarians from the civilized point of view – as inferiors.¹⁷ On the contrary, the barbarians were at the centre of their own world and played a vital part in the development of the West, as exemplified in the event that toppled the Hallstatt culture; the Gallic explosion.

Competition and Iron

The Hallstatt D culture is important to the Gallic expansion. However, although most scholars think that the population of this culture must have been Celtic in some sense, it is fairly clear that this was not where the Gallic expansion began. The Hallstatt culture was characterized by centralized polities, perhaps even a single feudal kingdom with a prominent warrior elite. Social stratification seems to have been well developed, with a clear distinction between the elite and the common folk. In spite of this, the Hallstatt D culture may have been instrumental in the creation of a Gallic competitive system.

In chapter 1 (p. 14), mention was made of the different ways in which competitive systems emerged, and that the only important variation was claimed to be the *periphery system*, characterized by the presence of a great power. The empire is itself not a member of the system but only the smaller polities on its periphery. If the small polities or tribes manage to survive in the presence of the empire, it is only because they go to extremes to defend themselves. They are forced into a militarization process in order to survive. The empire, being much larger and therefore stronger, does not have to do this and can continue to rely on a small warrior elite or a professional army. This surely happened in the later relations between the Romans and

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the barbarians (see chapters 5-6) but may also have been at the roots of the Urnfield cycle and the Gallic one as well.

If there was a competitive system at the beginning of the Gallic expansion, the presence of the Hallstatt D 'empire' suggests that it may have been of the periphery type. Many Celtic societies existed in a wide arch around the northern edges of Hallstatt D, stretching from Bohemia to France, with others in the British Isles and Spain. But the ones immediately to the north of Hallstatt D were those which around 500 BC developed the *La Tène* culture that became characteristic of the Gallic expansion felt in large parts of Central Europe and beyond about 400 – 250 BC. These societies originated immediately adjacent to Hallstatt D, which in turn collapsed as the expansion began. This is exactly what we should expect from a periphery system as it overwhelmed its imperial antagonist, the same basic pattern that was repeated in the fall of the Roman Empire. We know next to nothing about the political organization of *La Tène* Gauls, and therefore cannot reconstruct the competitive system that may have existed in their area. However, the archaeological record at least shows no signs of concentrated power, and most scholars interpret the evidence as representing the existence of multiple small chiefdoms.¹⁸

Previously we outlined some characteristics required to identify competitive systems (pp. 61-63). These were:

- 1) *Real competition between autonomous political units.* This cannot be verified for the *La Tène* area but the apparent existence of a mosaic of multiple chiefdoms makes it very probable.
- 2) *Political equilibrium without major upheavals in spite of wars.* This cannot be verified either, but there are no indications of anything else.
- 3) *Closeness of the competing units.* This qualification is obviously met since the *La Tène* culture originated in a restricted and well-defined area of Central Europe.
- 4) *A similar culture and social structure.* This is self-evident for the *La Tène* culture, as it has been identified by archaeologists. If it had not shared a similar culture, it would not have been a *culture* in the archaeological sense.
- 5) *A dual identity.* This is also clearly demonstrated for the expanding Gauls of the 4th and 3rd centuries and, indeed, the more settled Gauls in the following period. They identified themselves both as Gauls and often cooperated as such, but also acted as individual tribes such as the Senones, Treveri or Boii, who could fight and compete with each other. A term similar to the Roman

Galli or the Greek *Gallatoi* seems to have been what they used as a common denomination.¹⁹

6) *Cultural and technological dynamism*. This is indicated by the creation of the innovative La Tène style in the art of the Gauls and the general fertility of Gallic culture in the realms of art, crafts and technology.²⁰

Although the evidence is not conclusive, it seems very likely that the original La Tène Celts of around 500 BC constituted a competitive system, either by themselves or, more likely, as a periphery system to the Hallstatt D 'empire'.²¹

One of the most important technologies of this period was the working of iron, which was slowly developing into an everyday metal. With the discovery of better methods of extracting and fashioning it into objects, this common metal was becoming cheaper and more readily available for use. The Gauls seem to have played an important part in these developments and this provides us with an excellent opportunity to examine the interaction between technology and social change. Iron working was surprisingly slow to reach all of Europe. Even if it had been spreading since 1200 BC and had been known much longer among the Hittites of Anatolia, it only ousted bronze in Scandinavia around 500 BC and did not become widespread there until after 300 BC. Why did it take so long? One could imagine that something as useful as iron should have taken the continent by storm; that the invention of iron working would quickly have unleashed its huge potential and transformed the world. Such a simplistic technological view of history has led many scholars to assume an almost incomprehensible lethargy among farming communities to explain the slow spread of technology.²² But technologies usually appear by demand, and here we need to look at the demand patterns that stimulated the spread of metallurgy.

In the infancy of metallurgy, all metals were rare and expensive. This applies equally to bronze and iron. Even if iron is one of the most common elements on Earth, it rarely exists in its pure form in nature but rather as a variety of compounds from which it is difficult to extract, as it has a higher melting point than other metals, such as copper, tin or gold. Iron needed extensive working by hammering and forging before it became really useful. While these methods were slowly being perfected, iron remained uncommon and costly. In the beginning, iron could be five times more expensive even than gold.²³ Of course, expensive metals would not see extensive use as household or farm utensils, and the demand for better shovels or kitchen knives is not likely to stimulate iron working even if it was later used for

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these things. Initially, metal (whether bronze or iron) was far too expensive to replace most wooden or stone utensils which were perfectly usable, even if they were less durable or effective. Iron working must originally have been stimulated by something else, something of more immediate importance for those privileged enough to be able to afford it. This can only mean arms and armour.

Social elites always need some mechanisms to safeguard their position and secure it from the envy of the less fortunate. These may consist of economic manipulation, some kind of social or religious rituals, or a patron-client relationship.²⁴ But most elites, if they possibly can, rely heavily on plain force or the implicit threat of it, to actively discourage social disturbance. Because they are necessarily few in number compared to the lower echelons, they need some equalizer, something to improve their efficiency in physical conflict with the lower classes. They can do this, for example, by hiring people to apply force in return for economic compensation. However, in many societies, especially barbarian ones, because of their lack of administration and control, there was a strong incentive to improve the elite's fighting capabilities on a personal level. To achieve this, elite members often used their copious free time to develop valuable warrior skills but they also, and even more importantly, used the most effective technology. This was particularly important if such technology was expensive and, therefore, not accessible to the lower orders.

Early metallurgy was ideal for these purposes, since metal was only available to the rich and powerful and could be used to make weapons and armour that significantly improved their bearer's chance against poorly equipped opponents. In all societies characterized by the presence of a warrior elite, we find a sort of *weapons cult* in which the elite's swords or other equipment are not only considered good and effective but acquire certain magical, mystical or even divine properties, Arthur's Excalibur being the most familiar example. The elite needed to believe that their weapons gave them special powers and set them apart from the common rabble. More importantly, they needed the common rabble to believe this as well.²⁵

It seems highly probable that the transmission of early metallurgy, both bronze and iron, was substantially achieved by this need of the elite to improve its chances in armed conflicts, which could be with the lower members of their own societies or against external enemies. Either way, the elite's prowess in arms strengthened its social position. Therefore, as long as iron was expensive and difficult to work, one would expect it to be diffused mostly by elites under pressure and in need of improving their military position. On the

other hand, a strong elite without such pressure could cling to its old ways. It could afford to neglect the development of iron working since, while the competitive pressure was slight, bronze was just as effective for their purposes as iron and initially less expensive. There are some indications that this is exactly what happened in Scandinavia.²⁶ The Bronze Age in this area seems to have been an exceptionally prosperous time for the local elite, as expressed in numerous and spectacular archaeological finds. As long as the elite was secure and could import all the bronze it needed it had little use for iron, and this may very well explain its late adoption in Scandinavia. Iron had been known there since around 1000 BC but only in very small amounts and bronze remained the most significant metal until around 500 BC. When it disappeared, it coincided with the virtual disappearance of rich archaeological finds. This may have had something to do with a deteriorating climate at the time, but probably was due much more to a lesser concentration of wealth in the hands of the elite (chapter 6).

A threatened elite would react very differently to improvements in metallurgy. When confronted with iron-using opponents, it would actively seek to acquire the necessary technology and implement it to its advantage. In a competitive environment, the elite would even seek ways of arming ever-increasing numbers of men with effective iron weapons. Of course, this was not possible as long as iron was rare and expensive, but under these conditions there was a strong and clear demand for cheaper iron and plenty of it. This is exactly the situation in which we could expect intensification in iron working.

Such was the situation in the Gallic competitive system on the eve of the expansion. Although we do not know the details of the competition, we can safely assume that it was quite intense. The Hallstatt D polity was an aristocratic one and its warrior elite was equipped with fine but expensive iron swords. The Gallic tribes to the north who eventually destroyed Hallstatt D did so not only by adopting popular armies but also by improving their equipment, and the richest archaeological centres in their homelands were those close to fine iron ores.²⁷ The method of producing metal from bog iron was also developing and spreading at this time. Iron, dissolved in water, has a tendency to accumulate in acidic bogs where it can be gathered and used in metallurgy. Such bogs are to be found all over Northern Europe and even if this ore was less desirable than others, it made it possible to produce iron almost anywhere. Iron was still difficult to work and remained expensive but it was becoming less so, and gradually even became available for mundane household tools where it replaced stone utensils, bronze being always too expensive to be much used for such things.

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The Gauls used their iron to their advantage in their expansion and it is often assumed that the new abundance of iron had a levelling effect on society by improving the military worth of the common man in war and his political standing in peace.²⁸ This is probably quite true, and improvements in iron working therefore seem to have enhanced the democratization process of the Gallic expansion cycle, as well as giving it greater impetus. But we should not let this lure us into a simplistic technological view of history. The new technology was only developed because it was sorely needed under conditions of intense competition and, in this sense, was simply a part of the militarization process. In general terms, competition tends to encourage innovation and this is the proper context for the evolution of new technologies.

The Gallic Expansion

As the reader should appreciate by now, expansion cycles are made up of three processes – militarization, democratization and expansion. I shall now examine each as it applied to the Gallic cycle.

That the expanding Gallic societies were highly effective in a military sense is self-evident. Without such effectiveness they would not have been able to expand and conquer large parts of Europe. However, little is known about the military organization and tactics of the original Gauls around 500 BC and detailed studies are hard to come by. We know that they used both cavalry and infantry and even chariots, the last-named probably mainly for transport and show. Pictorial evidence and later narrative sources seem compatible with the use of massed infantry. Their use of large, long shields and spears or lances may also indicate the use of massed infantry, and therefore the possibility of a popular army. Short swords seem to have come into fashion over a large area extending from Britain to Austria and this may also be an indication of massed infantry, as they are ideal as secondary weapons in these formations and were used extensively as such by the Greeks and Romans.²⁹ Cavalry also remained important and was probably the prerogative of the wealthier part of the population. The middle group, those who could afford the necessary equipment, would then have been used as infantry and the poorest or slaves either as skirmishers or not at all. The Gallic situation around 500 BC may thus have been very similar to the Greek one at the end of the Dark Age.

It is quite possible that the Greek colonies, or other Mediterranean civilizations, introduced massed infantry warfare to

Central Europe and the Gauls then developed it further according to their own needs.³⁰ If so, the concept of massed infantry would have had to bypass the Hallstatt, who had little use for it as it contradicted their proposed elitist society and style of warfare. However, their opponents to the north may have found it very useful in helping them withstand the Hallstatt. On the other hand, there is no good reason why the Gauls could not have developed massed infantry on their own. If the Greeks could do it, why not the Gauls, given that their military situation was similar? Cavalry seems to have been widely used, and to make military use of the general population a tactic had to be developed that could neutralize the advantages of cavalry. Massed infantry is the obvious solution.

The expanding Gauls clearly used popular armies. Most able-bodied men, at least those above a moderate economic qualification, were also warriors. Without warrior-farmers they could not have fielded such large armies or have been so successful in their conquests.

We hardly know enough about early Celtic warfare to positively determine the extent or nature of the militarization process but what we do know is at least compatible with an expansion cycle.³¹

Celtic society of the early La Tène culture does not seem to have been completely egalitarian, even if it was less stratified than that of Hallstatt D. There are indications of a warrior aristocracy in many rich burials. However, social stratification appears moderate and ordinary graves containing weapons are very common. This would fit with a society in which the aristocracy is in charge but requires the support of the common people for military action. Of course, we know nothing about the politics or communal decision making of the early La Tène Gauls, but it seems reasonable to assume that farmers were able to acquire some concessions from the aristocracy.³²

As the Gallic expansion progressed, there were clear indications of further democratization. Even as the overall power of the Gauls was increasing, the signs of stratification diminished. During the 4th and 3rd centuries, Gallic graves show little signs of a separate aristocracy. Chariots, perhaps the ultimate status symbol, disappear from graves except around the margins where they may indicate Gallic conquerors establishing new elites in acquired territories at the expense of the indigenous population.³³

This fits very well with an expansion cycle. We can speculate that as war and warfare became increasingly important to the Gauls, the political significance of the common warrior-farmer increased and a new ideology of equality emerged, persuading even the leaders to adopt an unpretentious style that also extended to burial customs.

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As the political importance of the common farmer increased, we should expect that, in an emerging expansion cycle, his most basic demands for land should be met by all possible means. Intensification of land use is indicated, which in European context usually means a shift from animal husbandry to growing grain. Some of the land previously placed under pasture for the herds of the rich and powerful would have been turned over to crops in the hands of ordinary farmers. The loosening of economic restrictions for them and their families would have resulted in a growth in population; something most ancient and modern writers agree preceded the Gallic explosion. For example, Champagne in France seems to have been particularly densely populated during the 5th century BC. This population pressure was relieved in the 4th century BC, when archaeology indicates a drop in population at the precise time of the historically attested migrations.³⁴ By this time the Gauls had developed all the ingredients necessary for a barbarian expansion. They had a military system capable of defeating most opponents, a growing population that had to be accommodated, and a socially induced land hunger that craved fulfilment. Under these circumstances, the Gauls could hardly fail to expand.

The first clear sign of expansion was the collapse of Hallstatt D around 450 BC. Remains from the princely centres indicate extensive warfare and destruction around this time and the consequent abandonment of settlements. Simultaneously, La Tène style superseded the earlier styles in the area. The Hallstatt empire had clearly collapsed and the simplest explanation is that it fell to the onslaught of the northern Gauls. The population of the Hallstatt area was probably not much different from the northerners, and a Gallic identity may quickly have developed in the area, as it became a part of the extended La Tène zone. Expansion also occurred to the west and east but, as with the Hallstatt collapse, it is difficult to estimate the extent of population movements as opposed to the diffusion of culture and socio-political conditions. The spread of La Tène was probably a complex combination of both.

The Gauls first burst into the written historical records provided by the Mediterranean civilizations after they invaded northern Italy around 400 BC.³⁵ According to documented legends and rumours, the migrations to Italy were preceded by a communal decision by which part of the population agreed to emigrate to relieve the pressure. Those that remained assisted the emigrants in their efforts and the two resulting populations continued to have contact after the migration.³⁶ This would explain how the same Gallic tribes appear in different parts of Europe, such as the Boii in both northern Italy and

Bohemia, which derives its name from them.³⁷ This expansion pattern also closely resembles the Greek colonization around the shores of the Mediterranean. The Greeks too made communal decisions to establish colonies where the excess population could settle. The mother cities made considerable efforts to ensure the well-being of their colonial offspring, and ties of kinship between them remained important for centuries.

For a time, northern Italy was a major sink for the Gauls' excess population and they established prosperous communities in the area, assimilating the previous population and acquiring many aspects of the local Etruscan civilization. From here, some travelled south, under their leader Brennus, moving down through the Italian peninsula where they inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Romans and sacked their city (traditionally dated to 390 BC). And yet, the Romans survived and managed to prevent the Gauls from advancing further south (chapter 5).

For about a century after the Italian episode, classical authors have little to tell us about Gallic expansion, perhaps because it took place away from the Mediterranean outside their line of vision. Nonetheless, archaeological evidence seems to indicate a Gallic expansion over a wide area in eastern Central Europe stretching from southern Poland to the Balkans and reaching the Black Sea. Much of this area was probably not densely settled by a Gallic population; some places were bypassed altogether and in others they presumably only arrived as a small warrior elite, but their influence was felt everywhere. By the mid 4th century BC, Greek authors mention Gauls (or Galatians as they called them) in the Balkans, and Alexander the Great met with them on amicable terms on the banks of the Danube in 334 BC. Rumours of Gallic expansion in the north reached Greek authors and, in 310 BC, the Illyrian tribe of the Antariatae tried to pass into Macedonian territory, having been displaced by the Gauls. By 300 BC the Gauls were becoming a great nuisance for the successor kingdoms of Alexander's empire, particularly Macedonia itself, the most powerful state in the Balkan Peninsula. In the early 3rd century the Gauls conquered Thrace (modern Bulgaria), and around 280 BC a massive Gallic thrust began to the south. The Macedonian king, Ptolemy Ceraunus was killed in battle, his army scattered and Greece lay open to the barbarian invaders.

In 279 BC they came again. Remarkably, one of their leaders bore the name Brennos, the same as the nemesis of the Romans in 390 BC, or perhaps it was just a royal title. The Greeks tried to stop them at Thermopylae, where 300 Spartans had made their famous stand against Persian invaders two centuries earlier. After prolonged heavy

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fighting the Gauls pushed through and Brennos directed his men to the sacred city of Delphi, which he sacked to the great chagrin of the Greeks. The Gauls were still in northern Greece in 277 BC, when a new pretender to the Macedonian throne, Antigonus Gonatas, earned his kingdom by defeating them in battle. This reduced the Gallic threat but, as so often happened, the civilized states of the south were happy to use the northern barbarians as mercenaries. Some of these mercenaries found their way into Asia Minor where, after ridding themselves of their masters, they established their own realm and became the Galatians, to whom Paul the apostle wrote in such a chiding manner.³⁸

We only know of the dramatic events in Italy and the Balkans because the Romans and Greeks documented them. Other, no less dramatic events may very well have taken place further north as the Gauls spread their influence and attacks. For example, the Britons who in Roman times inhabited most of Great Britain, exhibited elements of the La Tène culture and spoke a language very similar to Gallic. We do not know how this came about, whether through migration or cultural interaction or a combination of both.³⁹ But we do know that, by the 3rd century BC, the Gauls dominated Europe from the Mediterranean to the Baltic and from the Atlantic to the Black Sea.

All the more remarkable is their sudden disappearance. Less than three centuries later, there were no Gallic polities left on the continent and their ethnic identity was vanishing. Only in the British Isles did any Celtic ethnicity survive. The continental Gauls were being crushed between the Romans, the new superpower of the south, and the Germans in the north, whose expansion may very well have been triggered by the Gauls themselves (chapter 6). In the short time between the end of their expansion in the 3rd century BC and their collapse in the 1st century BC, the Gauls had become vulnerable. Their military might had deteriorated to the extent that they could no longer defend themselves against the new expansionists of the north and south, and this can only be explained by new social developments that set in after the end of the expansion.

Elitization

The Gauls expanded until they encountered the most accomplished military powers in the Mediterranean, the Romans and the Macedonians. Although we know less about it, others must also have found ways of opposing them, perhaps by copying their socio-military

system, and by the late 3rd century BC Gallic expansion had all but ceased. From this time onwards the Gauls had to adapt to more cramped conditions. They could no longer find outlets for their excess population through conquests and migrations but simply had to accommodate it. This set in motion some new social developments in Central Europe. We know that from this time, social stratification was growing and a new aristocracy, which marked its burials by chariots and other status symbols, was gaining power. From the 3rd century BC the Gallic warrior was becoming more heavily armed and the importance of cavalry was growing again, both of which can be interpreted as signs of a relapse of the popular army and the growing importance of a warrior elite.⁴⁰ By the time of the Roman conquest of Gaul in the 1st century BC, class distinction seems to have been deep-rooted and general, and was described by Caesar in these terms:

Everywhere in Gaul there are only two classes of men who are of any account or consideration. The common people are treated almost as slaves, never venture to act on their own initiative, and are not consulted on any subject. Most of them, crushed by debt or heavy taxation or the oppression of more powerful persons, bind themselves to serve men of rank, who exercise over them all the rights that masters have over slaves. The two privileged classes are the Druids and the knights.⁴¹

Coming as he did from a society with a rich tradition of free and politically active farmers (chapter 5), Caesar may have painted too bleak a picture, and in some cases the power of the privileged classes may have come about as a result of conquest by Gallic warriors. However, there is little doubt that stratification was growing. As prospects of acquiring new land diminished, the agrarian population had to adapt to conditions in which economic opportunities were limited, and household patterns and reproduction had to take this into account. This probably happened through economic limitation on marriage, making fewer people able to procreate effectively. As land became scarce it also became more important and land ownership now provided opportunities for a new elite. In this way things returned to 'normal', with a rich and powerful social elite on top that doubled either as professional warriors or as cult leaders (druids), thereby signifying the two most important methods an elite usually employs to support its position.⁴² The importance of elite warriors was rising again as the popular army found it more and more difficult to get decisive results, which would have caused the farmers to become less than enthusiastic about showing up for campaigns. When an

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expansion cycle died down, new processes began that are no less interesting than the expansion itself.

In barbarian Europe and to some extent in Europe in general, we see repeated expansion cycles at intervals of several centuries. These expansions rarely began in exactly the same locations, but much of barbarian Europe still experienced the effects of barbarian expansions more than once. In Central Europe we see the Urnfield expansion starting around 1300 BC and lasting less than two centuries. The next expansion cycle to affect Central Europe was the Gallic one, starting around 450 BC and also lasting almost two hundred years. Although the Urnfield and Gallic cycles began at different places in the region, the effects of the former spread to the place of origin of the latter, a fact of some significance. It means that the Gallic expansion started from a place that had gone through the fundamental reordering of society that accompanies expansion cycles about seven or eight centuries earlier. In the meantime, elites had re-established themselves, only to be restricted again during the Gallic expansion. After this expansion we see elites rising again in Gaul. The Greek expansion cycle of the 7th and 6th centuries BC, although not of a barbarian nature, came about five centuries after Greece felt the effects of the Urnfield expansion.⁴³

In those cases where we can discern expansion cycles repeatedly affecting the same regions, and also in others we have yet to examine, there seems to be a pattern of expansion cycles being separated by a period of about 500 to 800 years. Given the general conditions for expansion cycles, this is, of course, dependent on a competitive system being re-established, which although not guaranteed seems to have been quite common in the fundamentally decentralized conditions of barbarian Europe. So what was happening during these intervals, and why did expansion cycles occur repeatedly?

All expansion cycles that originate in competitive systems begin with militarization and the consequent loss of power by the established elite. As such expansions can occur repeatedly in the same region, it stands to reason that in the periods between them these processes were reversed. Militarization, or the important participation of the general public in war, must have been replaced by elite warfare, and instead of democratization we must assume the growing power of elites. These are not mere assumptions since the evidence, archaeological and historical, generally supports this. After the Urnfield expansion came the elite warriors of Hallstatt, and after the Gallic expansion there was a period of growing elitism in Gaul culminating in the rise of oppida and states (chapter 5). After the Great Migrations, chivalric warfare gradually emerged, elite warfare

if ever there was such a thing, accompanied by extremely deep-rooted class distinction (chapter 8).

Clearly, there is some general tendency at work here, and since it obviously involves the resurrection of elites I propose to call it, for want of a better term, *elitization*. This is the counterpart of expansion cycles and gradually re-establishes the general socio-economic conditions that they destroy. However, there is nothing to say that elitization must eventually be terminated by expansion cycles. Theoretically, the power of elites can go on forever, as long as it is not challenged from outside. But competitive systems provide a constant supply of such challenges, and where these abound, as they did in Europe, this will eventually produce popular armies and lead to expansion cycles, temporarily reversing elitization and reorganizing the whole social fabric.

It is now time to construct a model of elitization and see how it interacts with expansion cycles. At this stage, such a model must necessarily be largely hypothetical since it refers mostly to barbarian and prehistoric societies of which we have only limited information. However, having such a model to compare to the known facts, and the results of new research, can help us interpret and make sense of our limited source material. Later on we shall take a closer look at a relatively well documented case of elitization (chapter 7: Iceland), but the model presented here is mainly a logical construct from the conclusions of my investigation into competitive systems and expansion cycles.

In all agrarian societies, popular warfare with the inclusion of a substantial part of the population is always potentially superior to any type of elite warfare. Why else would the elite resort to using lower class soldiers or warriors as a cheap supplement to their own forces? As these soldiers came into use, there would be competitive pressure to utilize them in an ever more effective way and this instigated the development of tactics suitable for mass warfare. When these tactics had been developed and perfected they could usually be adapted by a popular army to a greater or lesser extent, and used to challenge the social position of the elite, thus demonstrating its superiority. Of course, this depended on the larger popular army being militarily superior to the smaller elite army, and this only happened when the necessary tactics had evolved. The potential of military superiority was therefore only realized when the elite had, through competitive pressure, been forced to develop effective mass warfare. Without this, a lower-class mob would have little chance of success against a professional warrior elite. The development of armaments and tactics should therefore not be seen as one-sidedly

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determining the power structure in society, but rather as an element in the ongoing struggle that characterizes any complex society.⁴⁴

The development of mass warfare under competitive pressure usually spells the end of elite warfare, although elites, when they survive, often continue to take a keen interest in war. A mass army is more effective than an elite one, once the necessary tactics have emerged, mainly because each warrior costs less to maintain and the army can therefore be considerably larger. In Europe, mass armies repeatedly replaced elite forces. In Greece, the hoplites replaced the earlier elite cavalry, while in the European system the knights were gradually ousted by pikemen and musketeers (chapters 8-9). The same probably also happened in barbarian Europe although less is known about it. Conversely, I know of no example in a competitive environment in which elite warfare replaced mass warfare by demonstrating its military superiority. This is even truer in the case of popular warfare, which emerged out of mass warfare during expansion cycles, a fact that should indicate that developed popular warfare is inherently superior to elite warfare and can only be replaced by it when a popular army disappears for reasons other than strictly military ones.

But what happens once the expansion cycle winds down, and how do elites and elite warfare become re-established? Societies where the ultimate power to make decisions, such as on war and peace, rests with a large segment of the population, can be called democratic, whether they have formal democratic constitutions or not. Many barbarian societies were fundamentally democratic in this sense, especially as they went through expansion cycles. Democratic societies are not necessarily peace-loving. On the contrary, they have a tendency to engage in all-out wars using their popular armies to their advantage and, in this way, are very good at defending themselves. But since they are democratic and the ultimate power to make war and peace rests with the common people, they are not prone to initiate wars except when the results are likely to benefit the common people in some tangible way. Democracies are very good at fighting total wars but only if the common people, who risk their lives and bear the economic burdens, feel that it is worth it.

Most people are not naturally bellicose and will only fight for a good reason. From the point of view of the state, there may be perfectly good reasons to fight wars that only enhance its power and prestige, or enlarge its tax-base. Non-democratic states are often quite ready and able to fight such wars for their own benefit but without considering the interests of their subjects. The extreme bellicosity of the European system in the 17th century is a good example of a time

when there were only a few years without wars, most of which had a negative effect on the commoners, even those on the winning side (chapter 9). Democracies are rather poor at fighting such wars. They can fight total wars that their populace finds necessary, but are usually handicapped when it comes to fighting for limited political reasons that their citizens find it hard to identify with. It is possible for large and powerful democratic states to fight such limited wars, but only if they do not greatly affect the general population. Thus, the United States has been able to fight a number of limited wars since World War II, but only because they had a fairly small effect on the lives of the majority of American citizens. When it became clear that one of these, the Vietnam War, could not be won as a limited war the Americans had to withdraw. The general public was not ready to commit to a total war in Vietnam, of little immediate importance to it. These principles apply to all democratic societies and even, albeit to a lesser extent, to bonapartist autocracies (see pp. 71) that depend on popular support. Hitler could never have embarked on his conquests if the German people had not felt that they could benefit from them.

This has important consequences when expansion cycles begin spinning down. Expansion ends when the obstacles become too great and there is nothing further to be gained from continued warfare. The expanding democratic societies then tend to settle down to a more peaceful existence. This does not necessarily lead to a reduction in the frequency of warfare, but it does mean that the popular involvement in wars, especially offensive ones, declines. Leaders and the elite, if there still is one, may want to continue to wage wars for their own reasons, but find it increasingly difficult to convince the common people to participate. In democratic societies, there is no way for them to force the people to fight if they do not think it necessary.

Although expansion cycles often destroyed or deeply altered the competitive systems that they emerged from, this does not mean that there was necessarily a great reduction in competition at the end of such cycles. They ended when expansion hit an obstacle, often in the form of a strong military presence. As competitive systems also seemed to have a way of re-occurring in barbarian Europe, the end of expansion resulted at most in a temporary lull in intersocietal competition. But the common people had little interest in participating in this continued and seemingly pointless struggle, and could only be relied upon to fight in their own defence. As the defensive capabilities of post-expansion societies must have been considerably greater than their offensive abilities, the result could only be a lessening of the intensity of wars, meaning that the

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warmongers, leaders and elites had to find alternatives to the popular army as an instrument for their aggression.⁴⁵

In cases where competition between equals remained intense, this sometimes stimulated the formation of states, even allowing a final expansive push. This may be ascribed to the fact that better organization generated success, and also as a response to the continued need for the occasional offensive action. Incipient states of this type seem to have emerged in Gaul one or two centuries after the end of the Gallic expansion and in Scandinavia after the initial Germanic expansion, although this trend was reversed, and later at the end of the Viking expansion (chapters 6 and 7).

Whether states were formed or not, the competitive environment necessitated some means of fighting offensive actions, particularly when a competitive system was re-established, even if the popular army could not be roused. The only way to do this was by relying on professionals, and even if the previous warrior elite had totally disappeared in the expansion, it now re-emerged. The rise of the warrior elite went hand in hand with growing economic and social stratification. The expanding barbarian societies were usually not only politically democratic but also economically egalitarian since the availability of land made it difficult to derive benefits from owning land cultivated by others. Once the expansion stopped and land again became a limited resource, a landowning class also began rising again. The landed elite naturally doubled as a warrior elite, at least in barbarian societies, but often also in state societies such as the ones that emerged in early medieval Europe. This landed warrior elite gradually became the dominant power in society, not only through its rising economic position but also through its superior armament and training for war, which made it hard to resist when it came to internal conflict.

At the same time, the popular army gradually fell into disuse and degenerated. Because the common people found little reason to fight wars, they soon became unwarlike and forgot how to fight in an orderly and effective manner. The tactics that were developed for mass warfare, and later adapted to popular warfare, faded away. As time passed, the common people became unable to defend themselves against either foreign invaders or their own warrior elite. At this stage, armies or rather mobs of commoners were still sometimes assembled as a supplement to the small elite armies, but they were of limited importance and society depended on the warrior elite for both its defence and aggression. When it had assumed much of the power in society, the warrior elite often actively discouraged the involvement of commoners in war, seeing it as its own prerogative and justification

for social position. Since society depends for its defence on warriors risking their lives, they are rewarded by an elevated social and economic standing, or so the argument goes. An underlying reason for discouraging popular warfare was, of course, the risk of rebellion and the possible threat to the elite's social elevation.

Elitization does not always proceed as far as this. Although it became rather extreme in medieval Europe, it was possibly mild in Scandinavia between the Germanic and later Viking expansion, although our information about this is rather scanty. Without something to counteract it, elitization might possibly go on indefinitely, producing a society marked by extreme elite domination, whatever consequences this entails. However, on the European scene that so favoured the formation of competitive systems, elitization was always reversed sooner or later.

Like all expansion cycles, the Gallic expansion was succeeded by elitization, which gradually reversed the effects of the expansion cycle. Instead of a popular army we find elite warriors. Instead of democratization we find a rising social elite, and instead of rapid population growth and expansion we now find slow population growth that finds no outlet through migrations but has to be accommodated in the homeland. But although things may temporarily have returned to 'normal', a series of convulsions still awaited the people of Gaul. They were still to meet a new barbarian expansion cycle, this time from Germania, and another civilized one from Rome, with the latter displaying characteristics that set it apart from the typical expansion cycles that originated in competitive systems.

¹ For a thorough discussion on the origins and nature of Celtic identity, see Collis (2003).

² The original terminology used by the Gauls is far from certain but this is a simplification that works well and is useful. See also Cunliffe (1999), p. 7. Incidentally, the term *Gauls*, which has become traditional in English for the people that the Romans called *Galli* is probably of a different origin, from the Germanic *Wal* (**walha-*) meaning foreigner. The French were still known to the Vikings as *Valir*, from the same root and it is also preserved in the English name for Wales. The similarity between *Galli* and *Gauls* is superficial and accidental.

³ See Collis (2003), pp. 98-103; Cunliffe (1999), p. 3; Fischer (1995), p. 34. Caesar (*Commentarii de Bello Gallico* I, 1), whatever we are to make of it, claimed that the Gauls called themselves Celts in their own language. For a useful general discussion of identity in prehistoric Europe, see Wells (2001), pp. 13-33 and for Celts specifically, pp. 74-83.

⁴ Drews (1993), p. 165. See also Ferrill (1985), pp. 71-74.

⁵ See also Kristiansen (1998), pp. 185-209.

⁶ The Hallstatt A and B are usually regarded as part of the Urnfield culture and thus the true Hallstatt phase only begins with Hallstatt C. Confusing but true.

⁷ Kristiansen (1998), pp. 265-267. Cunliffe (1999), pp. 44-63. Dietler (1995), pp. 68-70. However, Campion & Champion (1986, p. 60) choose to see the Hallstatt culture as a "peer polity" system which is broadly synonymous with a competitive system. For stratification in late Hallstatt, see, for example, Arnold (1995). The excavation of Goldberg in southern Germany revealed the residence of a petty chief, quite likely subservient to another and fortifications suggest that some threat existed around 500 BC (Jope, 1997).

⁸ For a detailed discussion on this hypothesis, the *core-periphery* relationship it implies and the relevant archaeology see Kristiansen (1998) pp. 210-313.

⁹ Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978). Cunliffe (1999), p. 57. Brun (1994). These ideas were pioneered by Friedman and Rowlands (1978) who constructed an evolutionary scheme for human societies. Like other similar approaches in anthropology, their *evolutionism* is not to be confused with biological evolutionism, except perhaps as a misinterpretation of it. Anthropological (or socio-cultural) evolutionism might be more aptly called social determinism, because unlike biological evolutionism the evolution is supposedly directional and goes through discreet successional *stages* (although the more recent *neoevolutionism* is less deterministic). It is therefore of the same ilk as other ideologies, such as *progressivism* and *historicism*, that tend to interpret social evolution as progress, where each stage is more 'advanced' than the previous one. In the case of Friedman and Rowlands, there are four periods: (a) tribal, (b) 'Asiatic' states, (c) prestige goods systems and (d) territorial and city-states. Even if they claim that their evolutionism is 'multi-linear' (allowing for more than one evolutionary trajectory) it still smacks of determinism. Consequently, their linear view of historical progression is methodologically questionable and their emphasis on trade and exchange seems out of place for most early societies.

¹⁰ For different interpretations, see e.g. Pauli (1994) and Dietler (1995). In discussing these general ideas in his overview article, Stein (1998, p. 24) claims that "the pendulum has begun to shift" and continues: "These approaches treat specific prestige goods as being so essential to the process of social reproduction that any interruption in their supply would cause the breakdown of the elite hierarchy whose legitimacy they uphold. This view treats prestige goods as immutable social facts, rather than as protean cultural constructions whose value can be created, manipulated, and, above all, changed." He concludes: "The ability of societies to redefine prestige goods means that the hypothesized dependence of local elites on specific imported luxury goods from specific locations may never materialize."

¹¹ As Fischer (1995, pp. 37-38) put it: "I am afraid [...] that the spirit of our own time is reflected in such [trade based] models more than the reality of the archaic world."

¹² Prehistoric political economy is a field of research which in my view needs some fundamental rethinking, and in order not to unduly complicate the current discussion I have tried to steer clear of it as much as possible.

Examples of modern thinking on these matters can be found e.g. in Sahlins (1974), Rowlands (1994), Kristiansen (1998) and in fact in most of the works about prehistoric Europe mentioned in the bibliography. Strangely, even an author such as Collis (1997), when reflecting on ideas about Iron Age society and economy, bases his brief discussion on the control of land (p. 36) on nothing but precisely the sort of assumptions that he otherwise criticizes. Stein (1998, p. 27) concludes his overview article thus: "It seems likely that the most productive approaches to the evolution of chiefdoms and states will make cross-cultural comparisons of the economic, social, military, and ideological mechanisms, strategies, and processes through which various groups in ancient complex polities attained, retained, resisted, or lost power." I couldn't agree more.

¹³ The term is derived from Marxist literature and relates to situations where the value of a commodity is determined by ideology or belief systems rather than its usefulness.

¹⁴ And yet, as Keeley (1996, p. 126) has pointed out, exotic goods can also be the result of plunder. Fischer (1995, pp. 37-38) emphasises diplomatic exchange rather than trade proper.

¹⁵ Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978). The model of a system where access to alien prestige goods determined the political hierarchy, developed by Friedman and Rowlands (1978), is partly based on some recent examples. At least one of these examples, and perhaps the most important, is perhaps a little problematic, being drawn from west-central Africa after European contact was made in the modern period. Here, social structures were indeed found that appeared to be based on access to imported merchandise from Europe that was distributed as prestige goods (Ekholm 1978). But, according to Collis (1997, p. 94), the main imports in Africa were not useless trinkets but firearms. It would seem more straightforward to derive the power attached to firearms, not from their prestige value, but rather from their firepower.

¹⁶ Jensen (1982, pp. 232-254) is an excellent example of how the prestige goods model has been used to 'explain' almost everything that was going on in Northern Europe through its exchange with the more 'advanced' south. This and other such attempts are in line with Wallerstein's (1974) *world system* theory which, although developed to explain the unequal exchange between the *core* and *periphery* in colonial and modern times, has sometimes (e.g. Kristiansen 1998), and very problematically, been used to interpret ancient relationships. See Harding (2000), pp. 418-422; Stein (1998) pp. 24-25; Hodges and Moreland (1988), pp. 80-81.

¹⁷ See also Renfrew (1986), pp. 5-6. Of course, attitudes have changed. The central or colonial powers are now less frequently seen as 'civilizing' (although this is still quite common among historians) and more often as oppressive, even evil. What hasn't changed is the general mindset that sees the active civilized powers at the core surrounded by a periphery that was generally passive (except when the barbarians went on a rampage to destroy civilization), and usually in the role of the receiver of influence, culture and

technology from the core or, indeed, as victims of colonization. The influence from the study of latter day European colonialism is obvious.

¹⁸ For a discussion of 'proto-La Tène' see Kristiansen (1998) pp. 322-334. See also Cunliffe (1999), pp. 63-67.

¹⁹ For the archaeological expression of this identity, see Wells (2001), pp. 54-73.

²⁰ Cunliffe (1999), pp. 111-132.

²¹ Champion & Champion (1986, pp. 62-64) envisage a *peer polity interaction* as instrumental in the spread of La Tène but, for lack of archaeologically visible centralization, cannot reconstruct the polities or their system.

²² For an informed discussion on the diffusion of technology with special regard to iron working, see Kim (2001).

²³ Collis (1997), 28-32.

²⁴ A patron-client relationship is one in which a powerful man protects and supports a number of lesser individuals and receives their support in turn, forging a bond across social stratification.

²⁵ See Kristiansen (2002), pp. 329-331.

²⁶ See also Kim (2001).

²⁷ Collis (1997), pp. 114-117.

²⁸ E.g. McNeill (1984), pp. 12-13, although he erroneously places the iron impact to around 1200 BC when it was still far too expensive to make much of a difference for the common people.

²⁹ Collis (1997), p. 102. Cunliffe (1999), p. 32.

³⁰ Randsborg (2004) emphasises that the development of massed infantry with egalitarian warriors, as well as certain other social developments, was common to the Mediterranean and Central Europe and suggests (p. 199) that the influence carried north was partly Italian. Kristiansen also notes similarities between north and south and links them with his theory of a *world system* (1994, pp. 15-24 and 1998, pp. 359-419 and *passim*).

³¹ We should keep in mind that the Gauls of the 1st century BC encountered and described by Caesar were far removed from their ancestors of the Gallic explosion, and their social and military situation was probably quite different (see chapter 5). Therefore, Caesar's description cannot be indiscriminately applied to the expanding Gauls of the 5th and 4th centuries BC.

³² This is more or less suggested by Kristiansen (1998) when he speaks of "a certain democratisation" resulting from the inclusion of farmers' sons in warfare and providing a "rationale of migration" which in turn led to "an intensification of agrarian techniques" (p. 334). See also pp. 336, 342 and 345. Cunliffe (1999, p. 75), suggests "a major social change in Transalpine Europe at the time of the migrations". Büchsenschütz (1995, p. 62) describes early La Tène as "a society of free farmers" in stark contrast with the elite controlled late Hallstatt. See also Wells (2001), pp. 68-70.

³³ Kristiansen (1994), p. 13. Collis (1995), p. 79. Le Huray & Schutkowski (2005) give a good overview of the evidence (pp. 135-136) but show that in Bohemia, in late La Tène B (ca. 250 BC), the occupants of 'warrior' graves (with iron weapons) had consumed more meat or dairy products than the rest.

No such difference was discernable for female graves. This may suggest that there was some (but hardly conspicuous) social stratification at this time.

³⁴ Cunliffe (1999), pp. 74-75.

³⁵ There is considerable controversy regarding the arrival of Celtic or Gallic populations in northern Italy, with some indications that a part of the population in the area had been Celtic, in some sense, even from the late Bronze Age. During the 5th century, at the time of the fall of Hallstatt, archaeological elements related to the La Tène culture appear, but at a pace so gradual that it is difficult to claim Gallic invasions. We cannot deny the possibility of a general Celtic presence in northern Italy prior to 400 BC. However, this may have had little or nothing to do with the Gallic expansion since Celtic populations were widespread in Europe and only some of them took part in this particular expansion. On the other hand, we know with a fair amount of certainty that there were new Gallic arrivals in northern Italy around 400 BC and it were these that caused most of the problems for the Etruscans and the Romans (chapter 5). Pauli (1994), pp. 75-77. Cornell (1995), pp. 313-315. Ellis (2001), pp. 23-27. Cunliffe (1999), pp. 70-73.

³⁶ Livy V, 34. See also Cunliffe (1999), pp. 73-75.

³⁷ Cunliffe (1999), p. 73.

³⁸ Ellis (2001), pp. 73-109. Cunliffe (1999), pp. 78-85, 172-180.

³⁹ The archaeological evidence from the Middle Iron Age in eastern England (4th to 1st century BC) is consistent with (but doesn't necessarily prove) a growing population, with an intensification in agriculture and an egalitarian social system (see Champion 1994, pp. 131-34, 139-141). This possibly indicates that eastern England experienced the effects of the Gallic expansion, although this may not have involved a massive infusion of people from the continent.

⁴⁰ Cunliffe (1999), pp. 104-105. Kristiansen (1998), pp. 344-356. Collis (1997), pp. 145-157.

⁴¹ Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* VI, 13. For a discussion of Caesar's comments on Gallic social structure, see Dunham (1995).

⁴² Cf. Kristiansen (1998) p. 345-350.

⁴³ Randsborg (2004) has noted the repeated trends towards egalitarianism and aristocratic decline, first at the end of the 2nd millennium BC and again at the middle of the 1st millennium BC, both north and south of the Alps.

⁴⁴ McNeill (1984, especially pp. 1-23) is an example of a scholar who too one-sidedly derives social change from military technology.

⁴⁵ The exception is, of course, when external pressure was extreme, such as that exerted by the Romans on the Germanic peoples, which forced the general populace to remain militarily active if they did not want to submit to Roman rule and the taxation, loss of freedom and general oppression that this entailed (chapter 6).

5. THE RISE OF ROME

The long struggle between the Romans and the barbarians on their northern borders was a defining element in European history. It is often presented as a struggle between civilization and barbarism, and this is true in a sense and even useful if we can resist assigning values to the terms – ‘good’ for civilization and ‘bad’ for barbarism. Rome was the only true world empire that the West has seen and was, as such, the very opposite of competitive systems, otherwise so important in Western history. Therefore, the rise and fall of the Roman Empire is central to this study and its conflict with the barbarians serves to illuminate the fundamental difference between world empires and competitive systems, as well as the massive power unleashed by expansion cycles.

At the same time, Roman expansion is also very interesting in its own right. Not only did Rome display the characteristics of a frontier empire in relation to two rather than just one competitive system, but its expansion also displayed symptoms familiar from other expansion cycles, albeit only some of them. How then does the rise of Rome relate to the models of competitive systems and expansion cycles, why did it succeed and how did it change itself into a world empire?

The metamorphosis of a small town on the banks of the Tiber to a world empire is sometimes described as nothing less than miraculous. This miracle is often ascribed to a superior Roman organization, not least in terms of the military. Indeed, it seems extraordinary that a world empire should trace its origins to a city-state but in the context of the ancient world this is not all that strange as many great powers, such as Carthage and Assyria, had similar origins. If we break down the course of events into two different episodes it becomes less mysterious. The first of these is the rise of Rome to dominate Italy, and the second how Italy came to dominate the Western World. These two episodes coincide roughly with Rome’s position, firstly at the edge of the Etruscan world and secondly at the edge of the Hellenistic world. It seems very likely that Rome grew as a frontier empire, first to one and then to the other of these systems, but its expansion was fuelled at the same time by profound changes in Roman society.

On the Etruscan Frontier

The Greek expansion cycle of the Archaic period (8th to 6th century BC) resulted in the establishment of several Greek colonies in southern

Italy, perhaps beginning as early as around 770 BC.¹ By the time the Homeric epics were composed there were already some Greeks living in colonies in Italy. These colonists brought with them Greek culture, organization and warfare and disseminated them over a large part of the peninsula, with the result that the indigenous cultures took on a decidedly Greek hue, with Greek fashion, military tactics, alphabets and even gods and myths. This was particularly strongly felt among the Latins of central Italy but also among their northern neighbours, the Etruscans.

In the 6th century BC, the Etruscans were the dominant indigenous culture in Italy. These enigmatic people had a rich civilization of their own, albeit one heavily influenced by the Greeks, and left behind an abundance of archaeological remains. They had adopted a Greek-derived alphabet and numerous inscriptions survive but are still poorly understood, as the Etruscan tongue is unrelated to any known language. If they wrote histories or longer texts of narrative value these have not survived, and their history has to be patched together from their inscriptions, archaeology and the occasional mention they received in Greek and Roman literature. Consequently, their history is not well known and is largely a matter of guesswork.

Their homeland was in modern Tuscany, to which they gave their name, and they lived there in a number of city-states with names like Veii, Tarquinii, Clusium or Caere. Like the Greek city-states, these cities were independent and often fought among themselves. Also like the Greeks they had some common institutions, a 'League' which earlier scholars sometimes assumed constituted an Etruscan federal empire. But there really is no evidence of this League ever acting as a political body, and the modern consensus is that it was primarily a religious institution.² However, it did signify a common Etruscan identity, just as the Delphic Oracle and the Olympic Games did for Greece.

Etruria (the ancient name for the Etruscan homeland) looks very much like a competitive system with its warring city-states, common outer identity and the dynamism that allowed it to dominate large parts of Italy. In fact, Etruria resembles a somewhat smaller and slightly later version of the Greek system but behaving essentially in a similar way.³ Etruria may even have gone through an expansion cycle, as it is well known that its inhabitants spread their culture to Campania (south of Rome and Latium) and the Po Valley in the north during the 7th and 6th centuries.⁴ This was certainly a time of population explosion in Etruria, with a corresponding intensification of agriculture. It has recently been estimated that annual growth

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could even have reached 3% in the 7th and 6th centuries BC, about as high as is humanly possible.⁵ The Etruscans are justly famous for the elaborate tombs they built to honour their dead and which were concentrated into veritable necropolises. While many early tombs were staggeringly rich and well decorated, they were becoming less so by the 6th century BC, the time at which their numbers were growing as more families apparently gained access for burials in the necropolises, producing regiments of small standardized tombs in the process.⁶ More egalitarian burial customs, such as these, do not *necessarily* indicate a democratization process but it is certainly what we would expect during one.

Even if the exact nature of this expansion is difficult to determine, it is clear that the Etruscans reached the zenith of their power in the 6th century BC and exerted a considerable influence on Rome at that time. It used to be commonly believed that Rome originated partly as an Etruscan city or at least had gone through a period of Etruscan domination, but recent research suggests that this now seems far from certain.⁷ However, it is quite obvious that early Rome had close connections with the Etruscans and, situated as it was on their southern borders, played a considerable part in their political machinations, even if it was basically a Latin city.

Even in the earliest times, Rome seems to have been a remarkably open city, welcoming not only Latin immigrants but also Sabines (another Italic group), Etruscans and others.⁸ By the 6th century BC it was already by far the biggest city in Latium and even large compared to Etruscan cities.⁹ It had also become politically dominant in Latium, controlling more than one-third of its total area by the end of that century.¹⁰ This situation leads one to suspect that Rome may have started its rise to greatness as a frontier empire to the Etruscan system. The evidence is circumstantial but includes Rome's location at the very edge of the Etruscan system, its cultural and political ties with the Etruscans, and the fact that initial Roman expansion was directed away from the Etruscans, towards the domination of Latium and only turned its attention to the Etruscans around 400 BC when it had grown much larger and more powerful than any of the Etruscan cities. All this is consistent with the model of a frontier empire (p. 79 above). However, the evidence is not conclusive, as we don't actually know to what extent the Roman conquest of Latium depended on benefits derived from the Etruscan system. Earlier opinion suggested that early Rome relied heavily on its Etruscan connections, but serious doubt has recently risen.¹¹ Our best option is probably to regard Rome as being a partial member of the Etruscan system, even if it was not an Etruscan city, thus having participated in its

dynamism, which it then used to expand its dominion as a frontier empire.

But there is another side to early Roman expansion that is directly connected to the Greek expansion and hoplite warfare. Classical hoplite warfare emerged in Greece around 700 BC and had already spread to the Italian peninsula in the 7th century BC. Etruscans had adopted the hoplite phalanx before 600 BC and the Romans must have done likewise no later than the 6th century BC.¹² The Romans later developed it according to their own preferences, but this should not obscure the fact that the Greek phalanx and the Roman legion signified the same sort of warfare, that of massed infantry. By the 6th century BC, the Romans were using a mass army and the indications are that it was rapidly developing into a popular army with the active participation of a large proportion of its citizens. The political implications of putting arms into the hands of these citizens were quickly felt.

The last kings of Rome are portrayed more or less in the mould of Greek tyrants, who, at least in theory, often acted as kinds of dictators on behalf of the people, using their concentrated power to bring reforms to the lower classes in spite of aristocratic opposition. This is exactly how the last three or four kings of Rome emerge from our sources, as tyrants that depended on popular support to carry out reforms that so alienated the aristocracy that the very idea of kingship remained repulsive to them for a long time to come.¹³ The most important of these kings was Servius Tullius whose reign is traditionally dated to 578-534 BC but was, in reality, probably a little later.¹⁴ His reforms had a strongly military character and were centred on a reorganization of the army and its relationship with the populace. Instead of a being based on regional units with clan loyalties and strong ties to the local aristocracy, the army units now mixed together men from all the tribes, so that each of them amounted to a cross-section of the community. In this way, old loyalties were disrupted and the army served to strengthen the power of the state at the cost of individual aristocrats.¹⁵ Servius was a usurper whose power undoubtedly rested with the hoplite army and this army now became a powerful political force in its own right through the *comitia centuriata* which now emerged as the foremost of a bewildering variety of assemblies that characterized the Romans constitution. The effect of this reform was primarily to transfer power to a wider segment of the population, even if the result was far from being fully democratic. Voting in the *comitia centuriata* was so structured that it favoured the wealthy above the poor (and the old above the young) in accordance with the principle of citizen-soldiers

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providing their own arms according to their means. But it did signify a fundamental shift in power from the old aristocracy to the citizen-army.¹⁶

We can envisage the last kings of Rome as tyrants in the Greek style or, to use a more general description, as bonapartist rulers – dictators dependent on popular support (pp. 71 above). And as so often happens with bonapartist dictatorships, it soon seems to have degenerated into despotism pure and simple. At least this is what Roman sources tell us about the last king of Rome, Tarquinius Superbus (traditional dates: 534-509 BC). In spite of his considerable successes in expanding the power of Rome, he became so unpopular that in the end a group of aristocrats conspired to overthrow him and set up a republic in 509 BC. This could not possibly have succeeded had the army not allowed it and the aristocrats may have curried its favour by extending the rights and privileges of the *comitia centuriata*.¹⁷

This set the stage for the early republic, a time of constant friction but also cooperation between the old aristocracy – the patricians – and the rest of the free Roman population, the plebeians. The patricians provided the leadership, but they could not ignore the interests and grievances of the plebeians who provided the growing state with its military power. The result seems to have been a sort of alliance between the state and the citizen-soldiers/farmers, which projected the Roman republic into an expansion that was in many ways quite similar to normal expansion cycles but in other ways is surprisingly different.

Roman expansion can be construed as a variant of expansion cycles, a variant we can call *empire expansion*. Unlike the usual variety, which in this context we can call *system expansion*, it does not originate in a competitive system as such but often, perhaps even always, in a frontier empire to such a system. This means that instead of involving a number of competing polities, an empire expansion cycle occurs in a single state, and it has to be a state polity. As we have seen, frontier empires are always state polities and a state is needed to carry out and maintain an expansion of this type. Apart from the Roman republic, the model of empire expansion also seems to apply, at least partly, to Macedonian expansion (p. 79), American expansion into the West (p. 271) and perhaps even Russian expansion into Siberia.

In the case of Rome, we find the normal processes of militarization, democratization and expansion but their behaviour is slightly different. Empire expansion cycles seem to connect with a militarization process in the competitive system that they are

attached to. These empires seem to expand either slightly before or just after the system itself expands, the militarization of the empire being directly connected to the militarization of the system. In the Roman case, we find that militarization occurred at the same time or slightly later than in the Etruscan system and perhaps in the wake of an Etruscan expansion cycle. The empire, like the politics of the system, begins to depend on a mass army, even a popular army, for defence and aggression and this leads to a certain level of democratization. In Rome, democratization was muted and this is probably a necessary feature of empire expansion cycles prior to the development of the modern state (see p. 267 below). The simple state structure of ancient times would not have been able to contain full democratization in a large and expanding state. Had democratization reached its full potential of transferring most or all power to the people, this would probably have resulted in a democracy that, prior to the development of the modern coercive and bureaucratic state, could only be a direct democracy (see chapter 6: Elitization and Statehood).¹⁸ In fact, even if the American expansion shows full democratization, empire expansion cycles seem to be considerably less dependent on the political emancipation of the people than system expansions are, and this is probably explained, as in Rome, by the ability of the expanding state to grant its citizen-soldiers land from its conquests and so keep the populace relatively happy despite having limited political power.

The expansion itself is characterized as being a state expansion under strong leadership, propelled by a social pact between the state and its citizen-soldiers. These soldiers were ready and willing to fight for the state but in return expected to be rewarded, particularly with land.¹⁹ The expansion was driven by a mass army of a more or less popular nature, and because of its popular character the state had an almost inexhaustible source of soldiers to drive its expansion. One has to be amazed by Roman resilience in the face of defeat, for example in the 2nd Punic War against Hannibal when they suffered one setback after another but just kept bouncing back until the Carthaginians were exhausted. The Greek historian Polybius claimed that Romans and their Italian allies, capable of bearing arms, numbered more than 700,000 infantry and 70,000 cavalry.²⁰ Against such massive military capacity, Hannibal's initial force of less than 20,000 men could hardly succeed, even with later additions and his tactical genius.

Conquest made new lands readily available, and this spurred population growth, as the abundant supply of land made it relatively easy for the common people to acquire some, set up a new home and family, and begin having children. In this way, the Romans colonized

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their conquered territories and, at the same time, the infusion of a Roman population served to consolidate their conquests. During their expansion cycle, the Romans were not wholly dependent on pacifying and Romanizing the indigenous population. To some extent they simply replaced the locals after having massacred them, driven them out or enslaved them.

While this may appear an idyllic picture of a state controlled by the aristocracy working in perfect harmony with the common people to their mutual benefit, cooperation between them was, in reality, fraught with difficulties, civil strife and almost constant friction between the patricians and the plebeians. The latter had to guard their rights jealously, and there was almost a perpetual demand for more land to be given to the common people, a demand the patricians were often none too eager to fulfil since they wanted the land for themselves. In fact, it could even be said that, rather than reflecting patrician-plebeian cooperation, Roman expansion was driven by their conflicting interests that could only be resolved through conquest.

Under the kings of the 6th century BC, Rome had become the greatest power in Latium and was perhaps already stronger than any one of the Etruscan cities. With their Latin allies the Romans were indeed a formidable local power in Italy by the time the last king was driven out in 509 BC. And yet, there was a century-long delay following the establishment of the republic before Rome started to expand in earnest. During the 5th century BC, Rome was in trouble. Its Latin allies grew restive, and Rome's territory seems to have contracted rather than expanded as it came under attack from Sabines and other invading highlanders.²¹

At the same time, much of Rome's energy was spent internally as the patricians and plebeians struggled to reach some sort of accommodation. It was during this time that Roman society became polarized into patricians and plebeians as the former closed their ranks against newcomers and, in effect, forced the better-off plebeians to side with the lower classes, which only served to strengthen the plebeian movement.²²

There are many uncertainties in the early history of Roman society and economy, and our information on property and landholdings is both extremely scanty and controversial. However, it does seem quite clear that access to land was a major issue in early Roman politics and a fundamental grievance of the plebeians was their demand for more land. Much of the land of Rome was public (*ager publicus*) and most of it was probably the result of conquest. The rich and powerful tended to control this land and use it as they would their ancestral estates, or occupy it with their clients and dependants.

For their part, the plebeians repeatedly demanded that this public land should be divided and distributed between Roman citizens as private property.²³

It was only at the end of the 5th century BC that Rome emerged from its internal and external troubles and began its inexorable rise. This seems to have been, in part at least, the result of a certain accommodation reached between the patrician and plebeian parties in the mid 5th century BC, when the patricians accepted the legitimacy of plebeian institutions that formed a crucial part of the Roman constitution from then on.²⁴ Despite several attempts, the partial inclusion of the plebeians in the government did not immediately produce agrarian reform.²⁵ While Rome was not expanding, such reform would necessarily have been at the expense of the vital interests of the patricians and it was only when Roman expansion began that the land hunger of the lower classes found its outlet, relieving the social tensions to some degree.

Towards the end of the 5th century, BC Rome became far more aggressive and conducted a series of campaigns against its neighbours. This coincided with reforms of the Roman military, introducing pay for soldiers and so opening the door to the development of a semi-professional army but still characterized by large scale popular participation. This new era of expansion culminated in Rome's conquest and occupation of the Etruscan city of Veii in 396 BC.²⁶ But only a few years later (390 BC or perhaps in 387 or 386 BC), Rome itself was captured and sacked by a horde of marauding Gauls. These Gauls were now in the midst of their own expansion cycle, had already occupied the Po Valley and were severely testing the Etruscans. However, the Gallic attack was not followed by occupation or settlement in central Italy and Roman recovery was swift. In fact, the long term effect of the Gallic invasions of Italy may have been to Rome's advantage as the Etruscans, weakened by Gallic incursions, were now less able to stand up to Roman aggression.

Rise to Empire

After the Gallic setback, Roman expansion began in earnest. Although by no means always victorious, the Romans usually prevailed through a combination of dogged determination, resilience and a remarkable ability to assemble new armies in place of ones that were lost, whether against Latin allies in revolt, semi-barbarian Samnites from the southern highlands, Greeks or Etruscans. By 300 BC, Rome had become the dominant power in Italy and having survived its first

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encounter with a Hellenistic power in 280 BC, when King Pyrrhus of Epirus came to the aid of the Greeks in southern Italy, it gradually emerged as the ruler of the entire Italian peninsula. The start of the first Punic war in 264 BC marked the entrance of Rome as a major player in Mediterranean power politics, and it was Rome's hold on Italy that not only allowed this but demanded it.²⁷

Having conquered Italy, the Romans were in an admirable position to conquer the rest of the Mediterranean. But even if the Romans were great organizers and empire builders, we should not forget that their home base in Italy was essential to their success. By controlling all of Italy, Rome had risen to become a regional power in the central Mediterranean and this brought it into direct conflict with another established power in the region, Carthage. Rome emerged victorious from this struggle, the famous Punic Wars, and as the second of these, the war with Hannibal, ended in 201 BC, Rome was well on her way to empire.

But Rome's rise to empire was not all a matter of organizational skills and military prowess. As usual, much of history can be reduced to geography, and with their Italian base the Romans were in an excellent position to start building a world empire. Italy had basically two things going for it: a large, prosperous population and an admirably strategic position in the Mediterranean.

Ancient population figures are, of course, a matter of guesswork, although our information for ancient Italy is better than usual. By 200 BC, the population of Roman Italy may have been about 5 million and was growing rapidly. In the modern world, this doesn't seem much, but it has to be placed in context. At the same time, the population of all Europe is estimated to have totalled only 26 million, and that of Greece (modern boundaries) 2.5 million.²⁸ Having just crushed the Carthaginian Empire and acquired most of Spain in the process, Rome was now, in the Western World, second only to the Seleucid Empire, the largest of the Hellenistic successor kingdoms, which covered most of Iran, Mesopotamia, Syria and Asia Minor. As the two largest powers in the West, both with ambitions of regional hegemony, Rome and the Seleucid kingdom were bound to come into conflict. This happened quite soon, and in 190 BC Rome and her Hellenistic allies routed the Seleucid army at Magnesia, in Asia Minor. This was a blow from which the Seleucids never recovered. Their empire quickly began to crumble, leaving Rome as the supreme power in the Western World. It then took the Romans a further two centuries to gather most of the civilized parts of the West under their wing, and some of the uncivilized parts as well. As no one could really

threaten them they were in no particular hurry, and annexed one region after another in small digestible portions.

While it is undoubtedly quite true that the Romans had some impressive organizational and military skills, we should not forget that they depended on the wealth and manpower of Italy for their conquests. The Roman army was not victorious just because it was good, but also because it was large and well equipped. Without the resources of Italy, the Romans could never have established an army large enough to defeat the major Mediterranean states.

During the Bronze Age, navigation in the Mediterranean had not yet reached a stage where it could be used to build seaborne empires. It was only good for trading, some colonization and the occasional raid, but hardly suited for major military expeditions. By the time Rome was rising to empire, all this had changed. By the 6th century BC the Phoenicians and the Greeks had perfected the trireme, a custom-made ship good for nothing but war. With a crew of around 200 oarsmen and marines, it was the first really effective warship.

From that time onwards, naval battles played an important part in warfare and naval power was essential for coastal defence. And naval power also made seaborne empires possible. Transport by sea was, in former times, usually much faster and cheaper than by land and the development of navies opened up the possibility of transferring large armies over great distances, quickly and efficiently. With naval supremacy and control of the sea, water transport was in fact greatly preferable to its counterpart on land. This situation called for a completely new approach to empire building. Previous empires had been almost totally land-based and the sea had divided them. What now appeared was the possibility of a new kind of empire, a maritime empire.

These possibilities were perhaps first looked into by the Phoenicians but the Greeks were the first to fully exploit them. Athens built an impressive seaborne empire in the 5th century BC and other Greek states quickly followed suit. After the conquests of Alexander, the successor kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean were frequently held together by naval power. The Ptolemies of Egypt, for example, often had considerable possessions in Greece and the Aegean that were bound to them by their powerful navy. The Carthaginians, as successors to Phoenician activities in the western Mediterranean, also built a seaborne empire, using their fleet to bind their possessions in the Mediterranean islands and Spain to their homeland in North Africa. In its heyday in the 4th and 3rd centuries BC, Carthage was the largest seafaring empire the Western World had yet seen. The Carthaginian Empire thus signified a profound

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change. Instead of dividing one empire from another, the Mediterranean was becoming a major vehicle of empire building. It now brought the lands on its shores into close contact, facilitating not only trade and exchange of ideas but also conflict and conquest. If there was to be a world empire in the West, the Mediterranean would be both its nervous system and its digestive system, the core around which it would be built.

Italy lies in the middle of the Mediterranean separating its eastern and western halves, and is therefore ideally placed to take part in the affairs of both. It is not at all surprising that a Mediterranean empire should start its rise from the middle, a strategic position that allows the emerging empire to establish an influence all over the Mediterranean basin. Building such an empire from either its western or eastern extremes would have been much more difficult. Southern Italy and Sicily constitute the key to the Mediterranean because of their central position, which explains the prolonged struggle over their possession between Greek colonists and the empires of Rome and Carthage. Rome proved victorious in this struggle, not least because it had the greatest manpower in the closest proximity.

In the 3rd century BC, both Rome and Carthage were large and powerful states situated on the edge of the Hellenistic system, at the gateway to the western Mediterranean, a region very similar to the eastern half in terms of climate and natural resources, but which had not yet been incorporated into its system. It therefore constituted an opportunity for expansion of which Carthage was already taking full advantage. Even if the Hellenistic system perhaps never fully developed as an effective competitive system, it is still useful to examine both Rome and Carthage as frontier empires in relation to it. In the case of Carthage this is not quite accurate, as it began building its colonial empire in the western Mediterranean centuries before Alexander's conquests. Carthage itself was originally a colony of the Phoenician city of Tyre (modern Lebanon) but had gathered under its wing most other Phoenician colonies and gained possessions in Sicily, Sardinia, the Balearic Islands and in the Iberian Peninsula. Just like the Greeks, the Phoenicians and Carthaginians were responsible for bringing eastern Mediterranean culture, technology and organization to its western half, the difference being that Carthage achieved this not by establishing small independent colonies, but through considerable territorial conquests and subjugating the native populations. This was a colonial empire, perhaps the first the world had seen. Carthage does not conform exactly to the model of frontier empires, mainly because it did not append to any competitive system

during its early expansion. However, there are similarities. Carthage did grow up on the outskirts of the civilized eastern Mediterranean which, even if it did not constitute a competitive system until Hellenism, still added up to a concentration of linked civilizations, the benefits of which Carthage used in building its colonial empire.

By the 3rd century BC, Carthage had become largely Hellenized and the same, of course, goes for Rome. Both of these empires were perched on the edge of the Hellenistic world, both were set for expansion into the barbarian west, and as such were bound to collide. In the ensuing struggle that lasted more than a century (264-146 BC), Rome had the advantage of a greater homeland population, but this might not have been enough to prevail against Carthaginian naval superiority had the Romans not also possessed a social system that propelled their expansion.

Roman expansion was an example of *empire expansion*, a variant of expansion cycles, and characteristic of a number of frontier empires (pp. 79 above). The social system that propelled the expansion took shape in the 4th and early 3rd centuries BC and lasted until the 1st century BC. Like most expansions, it depended on military strength, in this case based on a mass army of a decidedly popular character. The origin of the Roman mass army perhaps goes back to the Etruscan expansion of the 6th century BC but, as an expanding frontier empire, Rome retained its mass army and managed to turn it into an instrument for the enlargement of the Roman state, through compromise and conflict between nobles and farmers. This sort of thing was not common in the ancient world. Popular armies and expansion cycles normally coincided with democratization but democracy usually only worked in relatively small political units, certainly not one the size of Italy. This would set a limit on the size of any one state during an expansion cycle but the Romans circumvented it by retaining a strong nobility, thus limiting democratization while reconciling the interests of farmers to those of the nobility, through conquest. This was no mean feat, since their interests were usually diagonally opposite and could only be achieved by continuous expansion. Here is how it worked.²⁹

When the Romans conquered new territory, a considerable amount of land was usually confiscated by the state (often a third) and became *ager publicus* – public land. Roman citizens were allowed to use these lands under favourable tenancy terms and sometimes it was distributed outright as private property. This distribution of recently occupied land usually favoured men of agrarian origins and allowed them to acquire new lands, enabling them to start families. More often than not, this land was distributed to soldiers as a reward

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for their services and, as a very large proportion of Roman citizens served in the army, this distribution of land profoundly affected the Roman populace.³⁰ Distributing land to the farmers also maintained the foundation of the Roman military, as soldiers were mostly recruited from agrarian families. Without a solid base of free farmers, the Romans would not have been able to maintain their large mass army and replenish it almost indefinitely in times of crisis.

It was commonly believed in ancient times that the great strength of the Roman republic lay in the ability of the nobility and the people to work together for a common purpose and that the citizen army was a crucial ingredient to this cooperation and Roman success.³¹ The ancients were absolutely correct; a free and prosperous agrarian class was a precondition to Roman military power, and conquests maintained this class through redistribution of new lands. However, had the Romans been no more than a collection of egalitarian farmers, they would not have supported a large centralized state and would probably have splintered into numerous small communities. The nobility provided the glue that kept the state together, the ruling class that maintained order and planned new conquests. The problem was, of course, how to reconcile the interests of the farmers and the nobility. After all, nobility usually depends on exploiting peasants in one way or another, but reducing the Roman farmers to a downtrodden peasantry was incompatible with using them as citizen-soldiers, the conquering heroes of the Roman state. This dilemma could only be solved by constantly adding new lands to the state for distribution among farmers, as the old lands accumulated in the hands of the nobility.

Why would land gradually concentrate in the hands of the nobility? I believe that the reason behind this lies in a simple law of economic accumulation known as Pareto distribution. This law emerges from the obvious fact that, under most conditions, a wealthy person has a far greater ability to increase his or her wealth than a poor one and this means that there is a natural tendency for the formation of a property pyramid, with many poor people on the bottom but a few rich at the top. Small differences in wealth are gradually magnified, until a certain equilibrium is reached and this progresses faster the greater the initial differences are. The accumulation of wealth will later be discussed in greater detail (chapter 7: Iceland), but it most certainly was at work in the Roman republic as the aristocrats constantly amassed huge estates, either directly from the *ager publicus* or by buying or bullying it from the farmers. Even long terms of service in the army could cause farms to fall into neglect and be sold off. The plight of the Roman farmer was a

constant source of complaint and concern throughout the Roman Republic as his lands were being taken over by the aristocracy. Since farmers' possessions were constantly eroding from within, the only way the Roman free farmer could be maintained was by constantly replenishing his lands through external conquests.

The natural accumulation of wealth was generally a driving force behind elitization. In a situation where land was not readily available, the rich had a much better chance of acquiring it than the poor, and economic stratification therefore increased. Normally this would lead to the subjugation of the free farmers as they were forced to pay rent to the aristocracy for access to land where they could support their families. In the Roman case, however, the farmers largely escaped this fate by settling in newly conquered lands. Tenant farming was apparently rare until the so called *coloni* appeared in the 1st century BC. There was a constant demand for new land for the farmers and as long as these expectations were largely met, there were not many people willing to become rent-paying tenants of the aristocracy. This could be a problem for the great landowners since they obviously needed someone to work their extensive estates. Fortunately for them, the very conquests that satisfied the land-hunger of the farmers also created an alternative labour force in the form of slaves, thus providing workers for the aristocracy.

The Romans habitually enslaved thousands of people as they conquered new territories, and this flooded the Italian slave markets and brought prices down. Despite the difficulties in controlling and directing it, the cheapness of slave labour made it a good alternative to tenant farming, particularly since free Romans were none too eager to become tenant farmers and would therefore not have accepted high rents. Because slaves were often forced to work harder, slave labour could be far more productive than free labour and produced a greater amount of surplus that was used by the elite, the artisans and the idle in the cities, thus allowing massive urbanization. However, it has to be emphasized that this system depended on an ever fresh supply of slaves being brought to Italy by Roman victories and acquisitions. It is a fairly universal truth that without constant supplementation, a slave population has a tendency to dwindle due to high death rates, less than optimal conditions for reproduction, and the tendency, also evident in ancient times, for owners to emancipate their slaves.³² Without a good supply of new slaves, prices would go up and the profitability of farming using slaves would go down. Roman Italy of the last two centuries BC was one of the greatest slave-owning societies of all time.³³ Slaves in Rome constituted at least 20% of the population and perhaps as much as 40%, although considerably less

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in most other parts of the empire. Slave revolts ravaged the Italian countryside with surprising regularity, the Spartacus revolt of 73-72 BC being the most famous. However, this extreme sort of slave society was a fleeting phenomenon produced by the grand scale of Roman conquests during these times. Thus, we have the apparent contradiction of the brutal enslavement of millions being dependent on a politically strong lower class, a contradiction only resolved when we keep in mind that lower-class Romans were free people and the slaves were originally foreigners. As a result, there was no solidarity between these two groups.

The Roman expansive mechanism worked as long as the army was based on agrarian citizen-soldiers and their hunger for land could be satisfied by conquest. It also required the aristocracy and the state to hold things together, and if any of these components failed it would have been all but impossible to start the expansion up again. Still, the system worked for about 3 or 4 centuries (approximately 4th to 1st century BC) but to say it worked smoothly would be an exaggeration. On the contrary, it was fraught with difficulties and social strife of which the Gracchian reforms of the 2nd century BC are an excellent example.

The brothers Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus were of a noble plebeian family. By this time, wealthy plebeians and patricians readily intermarried and formed a unified nobility, although the distinction between them still survived as a constitutional relic and plebeian noblemen perhaps had a greater tendency to cultivate the support of the lower classes. Patricians and plebeians both held seats in the senate but a new political division was emerging between the *optimates* and the *populares*, the former guarding the interests of the nobles and emphasising the senate as the effective governing body of the republic, and the latter seeking support from the people and supporting reforms that would benefit them.

In 133 BC, Tiberius, the elder of the Gracchi, was elected tribune of the people, an officer with extensive power according to the Roman constitution, and charged with guarding the interests of the commoners. Like many of his contemporaries, Tiberius realized that the erosion of the agrarian class was endangering the Roman army and sought to remedy this by distributing lands to veterans.³⁴ To do so, he invoked the old Licinio-Sextian law from 367 BC, which stipulated that no one should hold more of the *ager publicus* than 500 *iugera*, approximately 130 hectares (310 acres).³⁵ This law had not been strictly enforced, and there appears to have been a number of vastly larger estates carved out of public land and held by various noblemen. These estates were now to be confiscated (not without

recompense) and distributed among the veterans and the poor. Of course, the legislation ran into fierce opposition and a constitutional crisis followed that ended in the massacre of Tiberius Gracchus and his followers in 132 BC. The optimates of the senate seemed to have won but it was not a total victory. They apparently did not dare repeal the Gracchian legislation and it was implemented, at least to some extent, in the following years, boosting the number of Roman free farmers and citizens.³⁶

A few years later, in 126 BC, Tiberius' younger brother Gaius was elected tribune of the people and began a programme of reform that was even more radical than that of his brother and included limiting army service and extending Roman citizenship. And like his brother, he paid with his life in 121 BC, as the political winds turned against him.³⁷

The land crisis and Gracchian reforms are often interpreted as a sign of the difficult plight and oppression of the Roman farmer. In a sense, this is true since it certainly was a reaction against the encroachment from the nobility. However, in a broader perspective, it is the exact opposite, a sign of the political strength of the Roman agrarian class. In most agrarian societies the position of the peasants was less than enviable. They were subject to the elite's political, social, economic and even ideological domination and their ability to resist was usually very limited. This situation was occasionally reversed in expansion cycles but once they were over the elite rose again and free farmers became peasants once more. This happened gradually as economic stratification slowly emerged, but the critical point was reached only when the popular army ceased to exist, as the warrior-farmers found that wars were no longer producing any beneficial returns for them. With the popular army gone, there was no longer any check on the rise of the elite and its military and political dominance soon became absolute. Elitization usually happened without much apparent fuss. The farmers had given up their arms voluntarily and in doing so also lost their political power and even their voice. As a result, we usually hear little about their anguish, as they became a downtrodden peasantry once again. This pattern had occurred many times before the rise of Rome and would happen many times again, but the difference was that the Roman farmers still had political power and a voice, thanks solely to their military importance. In spite of the ongoing elitization in the Roman republic, Roman farmers still retained their military and political importance and could therefore be heard and even produce some beneficial reforms. That is why the land crisis and the Gracchian reforms were a sign of an agrarian class that was still politically strong. It was an unusual

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situation but a part of the exceptional social system that propelled Roman expansion from the 4th to the 1st century BC and created the only true world empire the West has seen.

Of course, when we endeavour to explain some historical process we always try to make it seem inevitable – such is the nature of historical explanation. I have attempted above to explain Roman expansion through the models of *frontier empire* and *empire expansion cycle*, and so make it seem inevitable. However, it is always healthy to keep in mind that there is a generous amount of chance at work in history. No matter how well we explain the various historical processes that we encounter we still have to acknowledge that it was some kind of chance that turned Rome into a frontier empire to the Etruscan system. Rome was also fortunate in being able to harness its internal conflicts into an expansive push, and was again lucky to emerge on the edge of the Hellenistic system and be able to turn itself into another frontier empire. But it was not just luck. Competitive state systems have a habit of stimulating the emergence of frontier empires and Rome's empire expansion cycle, although unusual, shares close similarities to the more common expansion cycles produced by competitive systems. In any case, chance is woven into the very fabric of history, and given the propensity for competitive systems around the Mediterranean there was a good chance that a world empire would eventually emerge here.

The End of Expansion

All good things must come to an end and most bad things as well, and Roman expansion could not proceed indefinitely. Sooner or later it would reach a sea or desert that could not be crossed or meet up with someone it could not conquer. Alternately, it would reach a territory that couldn't be effectively controlled with the tools the Romans had at their disposal. In the end, it was a combination of all these things that worked together to put an end to Roman expansion.

The empire could neither expand over uncharted oceans nor sparsely inhabited deserts and this limited Roman expansion to the west, where it met the Atlantic Ocean, and in the south amid the arid wastes of Sahara. But geography also played a part in limiting Roman conquests in the north and the east. The relatively cold lands of Northern Europe were not as agriculturally productive as those of the south and tended to have smaller, more scattered populations. Not only did they produce little initial revenue, meaning that conquering them was hardly cost-effective in the short term, but they were also

difficult to control. The best reason the Romans had for expanding into Northern Europe was to eliminate the threat of barbarian attacks and, as such attempts met with failure, the Romans settled for establishing a permanent and well-defended border. In the east, contact was made with the Parthians, Central Asian nomads who had managed to conquer the Iranian Plateau and its neighbouring lands, including Mesopotamia. For a short time (115-117 AD), the emperor Trajan wrested the whole of Mesopotamia from the Parthians but his successor, Hadrian, decided that it was indefensible against Parthian raids and evacuated it. Could the Romans have followed in Alexander's footsteps and conquered the Iranian Plateau? Trajan may have dreamed of such a thing, but the Romans' relative weakness in cavalry would have made this impossible. The Parthian army was nothing but cavalry, some of it very heavily armed. Against this far more mobile enemy, the Romans would have been unable to secure their lines of supply and retreat in the vast expanses of Iran. And since Iran could not be conquered, Mesopotamia could not be effectively defended.

The second factor that limited Roman expansion was a social and military transformation that not only removed the need for expansion but also destroyed the main instrument for achieving it – the popular army, based on the class of Roman farmers. At the roots of this transformation was the professionalization of the army, which had begun as early as the late 5th century BC when the soldiers first started to receive pay. However, further professionalization was held in check for a long time. In the meantime, soldiers continued to be recruited from the agrarian class, serving for as long as needed and often expecting to be rewarded by land at the end of their service.

As the empire expanded, it became more and more difficult to find land for discharged soldiers in Italy and many had to be content with becoming colonists in far-away provinces such as those in North Africa, Spain or Gaul. This was not popular among Italian citizen-soldiers who much preferred to settle in familiar surroundings. Nonetheless, soldier colonies appeared in the provinces that helped to produce later generations of soldiers and, at the same time, to secure Roman control and Romanization. The prospect of having to serve many years in the army only to be finally settled far away from family and loved ones in a far off corner of the empire among foreigners and barbarians, tended to put a damper on Roman willingness to serve. Even worse was the fact that as the empire expanded, most of this service was expected to take place in far off lands and lasted for lengthy periods at a time when warfare was almost continuous. For

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those Roman farmers who already had lands to live on, military service became a crippling burden they wanted to be rid of.

As usually happens when an expansion cycle spins down, it was the politically strong farmers who resisted having to fight in the army when they no longer saw much benefit in it for themselves. As they still had considerable political clout, it was difficult to force them into the army and in any case an army made up of disgruntled conscripts was not a reliable tool and might even turn on its superiors. At the same time, ongoing elitization was eroding the agrarian base of the Roman army as fewer and fewer men met the property qualifications for conscription which were repeatedly lowered during the 2nd century BC, and the state increasingly assumed the duty of providing their equipment.³⁸

The solution was to rely increasingly on volunteers from the landless *proletarii* that tended to gravitate towards the big cities; men normally too poor to be eligible for service in the legions, who possessed nothing and had no stake in the Roman state and no roots in the Italian countryside. More than any other, these changes were facilitated by Gaius Marius (d. 86 BC), a man of obscure rural origins who rose to eminence through distinguished military service. In reality, Marius was simply responding to the challenges of his times when the state needed more soldiers, especially after the marauding Cimbri and Teutones inflicted a crushing defeat on the Romans in 105 BC (next section). The decisive step was taken when he converted the Roman army from a conscript militia to a standing force of professional soldiers.³⁹ These soldiers tended to become devoted to their generals in a pact of mutual interest since they relied on them to provide them with rewards at the end of their service. Unlike much of the earlier militia, they were not fighting to protect what they already possessed but rather in anticipation of what they might acquire. Therefore, the generals of the late republic, such as Sulla, Pompey, Caesar, Mark Antony and Octavian (later Augustus), could use their armies in their bid for supreme power – a process that eventually destroyed the republic.⁴⁰

The Roman Principate, the rule of emperors that was established under Caesar (d. 44 BC) and Augustus (d. 14 AD), was perhaps inevitable as the Roman state grew beyond a size that could be effectively controlled by a republic – a state that was based on the sharing of power. Once the Roman state had grown into an empire it needed a head of state, a stronger focal point for its subjects' allegiance than the rather impersonal republic could provide. The provincials and an army increasingly made up of provincials had little affection for a far-off senate or other republican institutions that they

had little chance of influencing, and when the legions started to obey their generals rather than the senate the republic was doomed. The 'Roman Revolution' orchestrated by Caesar and Augustus was still based on considerable popular support (and thus had a certain bonapartist character, see p. 71) and the Principate preserved a somewhat populist character for a long time.

However, it was the professionalization of the army and the decline of the citizen militia that ultimately diminished the political power of the Roman populace. It is completely logical that the critical step towards establishing a professional army was instigated by the popular leader Marius.⁴¹ Under the conditions of the enlarged empire, military service had become a heavy burden that the people wished to be rid of. With the establishment of the Principate, Romans were finally freed from military service. From now on they relied entirely on a professional army recruited on voluntary basis, mostly from the landless population.

By supporting the Principate, the people got their wish of being rid of military service and, ironically, this deprived them of their political power and cleared the way for unrestrained elitization. As the empire ceased to expand, slaves also became harder to find and more expensive, and the importance of slavery probably diminished over the next centuries.⁴² It was replaced by tenant farming, either by free peasants (*coloni*) or unfree tenants (*servi*) who were given a plot of land where they could live and raise their families.

Around the birth of Christ, the empire was settling into an existence as a large and stable world empire. Some outlying territories, like Britain and Dacia, were yet to be incorporated but in relation to the size of the empire as a whole, these are to be interpreted as relatively minor adjustments of borders. Elitization was progressing and a monarchy had been established making it a fairly typical empire rather than an expanding anomaly. Once Rome stopped expanding, this had to happen. The preservation of a citizen militia was dependent on continued expansion and, in turn, continued vigorous expansion depended on the citizen militia. Once this relationship ended it could hardly be re-established.

However, we have yet to survey the third factor that stopped Roman expansion – opposition so fierce that the Romans could not overcome it. As I have already mentioned, this occurred in the east where the Parthians stopped Rome but also, and from our point of view more importantly, in barbarian Europe.

Romans and Barbarians

The task of subduing barbarian Europe was a daunting one. Europe was one of the first areas in the world to adopt agriculture, and by Roman times had been a farming society for a very long time, some five or six thousand years. Barbarian Europe had a significant population and prolonged exposure to the Mediterranean civilizations had equipped it with many new ideas and essential technologies that were not much inferior to those of the Romans. We should not imagine that the Romans were so technologically superior to the barbarians as to make their conquest as easy as the European conquests of the imperialistic period (late 19th and early 20th centuries).⁴³ There was no technological gulf, and even if the barbarians lacked Roman organization they made up for it by their warlike disposition.

The crisis that induced the Romans to take the first steps towards developing a fully professional army was of the greatest historical significance. It came in the form of the first clash between the expanding Roman Empire and the Germanic barbarians, and signified a historic collision between two different societies that were both expanding.

In the late 2nd century BC, a large group of migrating peoples, led by the Cimbri and the Teutones, appeared in Central Europe. The roots of the migration probably lay in the Jutland peninsula, which later tribal names and toponyms suggest as the origin of the Cimbri and the Teutones, but their numbers were swelled by various additions along the way. In 113 BC they defeated a Roman army at Noreia, in modern Austria, but then disappeared for a while until re-emerging in Gaul, where they inflicted further defeats on the Romans in 109 BC (twice) and in 105 BC. The last of these, the battle of Arausio (modern Orange in southern France), was a disaster for the Romans and we are told that they lost 80,000 soldiers. It certainly was the worst defeat the Romans had suffered, at least since Cannae (216 BC), during the 2nd Punic War against Hannibal.⁴⁴ Still the barbarians did not press home their advantage, but made incursions into Spain, which allowed Marius to reform the Roman army and ready it for the next round. This time the Romans finally managed to defeat the invaders at Aquae Sextae in the Rhone valley in 102 BC and Vercellae in northern Italy in 101 BC. During these escapades, the barbarians repeatedly requested land from the Romans on which to settle in return for military service, so revealing the prime cause of the migration as well as the militarization and popular nature of the tribal armies.⁴⁵

But for most of the 1st century BC it was not the Germans that mainly preoccupied the Romans but rather the Gauls, who came under simultaneous attack from both Romans and Germans. Extensive Gallic lands in Central Europe were lost to the onslaught of the Germans, while in the west they fell relatively easy prey to the Romans, at least when compared to the later and much stiffer resistance of the Germans to Roman conquest. So why was Gaul so vulnerable?

During the last two centuries BC, Gallic society underwent some profound changes (chapter 4), of which the rise of a new aristocracy was only a part. At the same time there was a new centralizing tendency among the political units or tribes, manifested in the construction of the *oppida*.⁴⁶ These were large urban formations surrounded by walls with evidence of social complexity and a high level of specialisation among artisans. Local and long-distance trade was increasing, using the *oppida* as hubs. But primarily and originally the *oppida* came into existence as political centres as the tribes developed more sophisticated administrations. At the same time, taxation was introduced and the Gauls adopted coinage and writing after the Greek and Roman example and, according to Caesar, used Greek letters for both private and public accounts.⁴⁷

What these changes amount to is the development of states in the Gallic world – kingdoms and oligarchic republics – the formation of the *oppida* being distinctly reminiscent of the Greek synoecism or *polis* formation. Thus, the Gauls created an administrative system far superior to previous tribal organization but at the same time more oppressive to the lower classes. Although the Gallic expansion had spent itself, the Gauls did not stop innovating and were rapidly attaining a level of social complexity, during the last two centuries BC, comparable with the Mediterranean civilizations.⁴⁸ It seems likely that this development was fuelled by the continued existence of a competitive system in the Gallic world. The expansionist explosion of the 4th and 3rd centuries BC threw their world into turmoil but, when the dust settled, a competitive system was apparently still in place, probably directly derived from the one at the roots of the expansion and simply reasserting itself over a larger area. As the Gallic tribes continued competing and fighting wars, the benefits of an effective central government became apparent. Popular armies declined, but the sustained war effort favoured the best organized and in this way brought about the formation of states.

One might ask why the competition this time around did not stimulate the development or reappearance of popular armies and democratization. The simple answer is that, given time, this might

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very well have happened, but the new Gallic system was not to survive for long as it was destroyed by the Romans in the 1st century BC. It is not as though the warrior elites were eager to become dependent on the assistance of the lower classes in warfare, which they regarded as not only their prerogative but also the reason for their very existence, even if they expected commoners to contribute to local defence. All warrior elites justify themselves in their own eyes and those of the population at large by providing protection through the use of arms. They produce myths of their own superiority over the common herd and then try to live up to them. They certainly want no interference from people of low birth, and it is only through continued long-term competition that they are gradually forced to seek the aid of commoners in warfare. Before this could happen, however, the new Gallic system had disappeared.

The independent evolution of Gaul was cut short by the Roman conquest, effectively completed in 51 BC, and its competitive system was destroyed as the area was incorporated into the Roman Empire. At the time, the Gauls, or at least some of them, were under threat from the Germanic peoples that were now themselves going through an expansion cycle (chapter 6). The Germanic advance not only threatened Gallic identity but, since the Germans were relatively egalitarian, the whole established social order. It is quite possible that some lower-class Gauls welcomed the opportunity of being assimilated into Germanic tribes whose advance in this way constituted a kind of social revolution. Where a Germanic identity supplanted a Gallic one, such as in central and southern Germany and Bohemia, the Gallic state was dismantled, the oppida destroyed or abandoned, and the aristocracy expelled or eradicated.⁴⁹ It is therefore not surprising that Caesar, in his conquest of Gaul, found some local support among the Gallic oligarchs, who must have looked to the Romans to safeguard their social position.⁵⁰

It may very well be that elitization and state formation made Gaul vulnerable to attack from opponents that employed more or less popular armies. Statehood may have enhanced the competitive attributes of Gallic polities as they fought among themselves, but when faced with German popular armies or the peculiar state-sponsored semi-popular warfare of the Romans, it put them at a disadvantage. Their states were too small, weak and divided to be able to put up effective resistance against the determined and well-organized Romans.⁵¹ Only by returning to popular warfare would they have stood a chance, but this was not something that could be accomplished in a few years. Nor would the Gallic aristocracy have willingly handed its power over to the people. It was the Gauls'

misfortune to be crushed between two cultures both going through expansion cycles at a time when they were at their most vulnerable.

By the middle of the 1st century BC there no longer was a Gallic competitive system in Central Europe. The Gauls of the Roman Empire were gradually transformed into Romans, although their language lingered on in some places for a few centuries. Their competitive system was not the first that the Romans destroyed as they spread their authority over the Western World, but it was to be the last.

As the Romans and the Germans divided the territories of the Gauls between them, they inevitably came into conflict. For more than a century, Romans and Germans fought with varying fortunes until a kind of equilibrium was reached in the early 1st century AD. In this way, these two expanding systems cancelled each other out. If the Germans managed to stop Roman expansion, it is equally true that the Romans managed to stop the Germanic expansion by denying them crossings of the Rhine and Danube, if only temporarily. However, this conclusion was only reached after a hard struggle that, for a time, appeared to be going in Rome's favour.

In the last two decades BC, the Romans conducted a series of campaigns across the Rhine into Germania, gradually subduing the tribes between the Rhine and the Elbe and forcing them to bow to Rome's power.⁵² Germania seemed destined to suffer the same fate as Gaul – to become a Roman province and the barbarians living there to become civilized. The person entrusted with the task of consolidating Roman rule in Germania was Publius Quinctilius Varus, a veteran Roman official and patrician. A man of the highest qualifications, he was closely connected with the Emperor Augustus himself, reflecting the importance of his mission. But in 9 AD, Varus allowed himself to be tricked into an ambush by Germanic tribesmen led by Arminius, a former Roman ally from the tribe of the Cherusci. At a place known to the Romans as *Teutobergiensis Saltus* or Teutoburg Forest, Rome suffered a catastrophic defeat.⁵³ Here, in the heart of Germania, three legions, about 20,000 men, were wiped out by barbarian tribesmen. Varus lost his life, along with most of his army and the Romans, of course, blamed him for the defeat, although this may not have been entirely justified.

The battle was a true catastrophe for Rome, on a par with their earlier defeats at the hands of Hannibal or the Teutones and Cimbri, but there was a significant difference between the effects of these disasters. While the earlier ones had threatened the security of Rome or even its very existence, the defeat at Teutoburg Forest was of a different kind altogether. Rome was not threatened, but its attempt at

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conquering new territories was crushed. And defeat is almost always, at least partly, psychological.

The battle apparently had a profound personal impact on the Emperor Augustus. Suetonius, a notorious Roman gossipmonger and historian, described his behaviour following the battle as that of a man seriously depressed.

Indeed, it is said that he took the disaster so deeply to heart that he left his hair and beard untrimmed for months; he would often beat his head on a door, shouting: “Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions!” and always kept the anniversary as a day of deep mourning.⁵⁴

There is nothing to say that the Romans could not have regrouped as they had done so many times before, and renewed their attempts to subjugate the Germanic peoples. However, the times of easily assembled citizen armies had passed and replacing lost professional ones had become correspondingly more difficult. The battle of Teutoburg Forest was followed by intense warfare as the Romans tried to avenge Varus and his legions, but they failed to subdue the Germans.

A few years later, a top-level decision seems to have been made either by the Emperor Augustus or his successor Tiberius, who himself had had personal experience of fighting in Germania, to make no further attempts at expanding the Empire beyond the Rhine. Obviously, the defeat in Teutoburg Forest played a crucial role in that decision.⁵⁵

After this, the Romans hardly made any serious attempt to subjugate the Germans. The ‘philosopher emperor’ Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180), may have had some such scheme in mind in his campaigns against the Marcomanni, a powerful Germanic people living in Bohemia, but following his death, the project, if in fact there was one, was abandoned (chapter 6). In barbarian Europe, Romans did annex most of Britain and some territories beyond the Rhine and the Danube, which otherwise demarcated the extent of Roman rule on the continent. But both the occupation of the Agri Decumates, in the corner between the Rhine and the Danube and that of Dacia, in modern Romania, are best seen as defensive actions aimed at securing the existing Roman boundaries, rather than as serious attempts at expanding the empire into Germanic Europe.

In the centuries that followed, the barbarians living beyond the Rhine and the Danube established a firm relationship with Rome. It was not always a peaceful one but in between the violent episodes, fruitful commerce existed across the rivers, along with a lively

exchange of people, materials and ideas. During these centuries the barbarians learned a lot from Rome without becoming civilized or controlled politically by the empire. In the end this proved to be Rome's undoing, for it were these same barbarian peoples that would break through Roman defences in the 5th century AD, destroying the empire and setting the stage for the development of Europe as we know it. Without the impact of the battle of Teutoburg Forest in terms of limiting Roman expansion in Europe, this would never have happened.

What would have happened had the Romans been successful in Germania? While we can never know for certain, it seems obvious that the barbarian threat would have been seriously reduced. Indeed, there is no reason to suppose that the Romans would have stopped at the Elbe. If they could conquer Germania to the Elbe, why not to the Oder? And if they could reach the Oder, why not the Vistula? Pretty soon, most of the barbarian population of Europe would have been assimilated and Romanized and those that were left, perhaps in Scandinavia or Russia, would have been too few and far away to pose a serious threat to the Empire.

Many would say that this would have been a good thing. The Romans were advanced and the barbarians were primitive, weren't they? If so, it only stands to reason that the fall of the Roman Empire set history back several centuries. If we think of history as a straight line from the primitive to the advanced in which progress is made at a firm and steady pace (except when delayed by barbarian invasions!), this view may seem reasonable. But history is not that simple. Sometimes things change beyond recognition in the space of a couple of centuries or even a few decades. At other times, little seems to change for hundreds, even thousands, of years.

Among the most dynamic societies in human history are those of Europe, from the Middle Ages to the present time. These societies produced the scientific revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, transforming human knowledge, economy and politics and creating the basis for the modern world as we know it. Europeans and their offspring in other parts of the world have, from the 16th century onwards, more or less dominated world politics and reshaped the world in their image. The fact that, during this time, Europe was a competitive system undoubtedly played a very significant part. The European system could only emerge once the Roman Empire was destroyed. Whether we like it or not, there is no denying the impact of European civilization on the modern world but this civilization was built on the *ruins* of Roman civilization and could not have emerged, in any form we would recognize, had the Empire

survived. In a strange way, the Battle of Teutoburg Forest laid the foundations of Europe. It ensured the survival of the barbarians and the eventual destruction of Rome. It could, with some justification, be called the most crucial battle in human history.

¹ Cornell (1995), p. 86. Forsythe (2005), pp. 31-36.

² Grant (1980), pp. 117-122.

³ See Barker & Rasmussen (2000), p. 84.

⁴ Grant (1980), pp. 86-114. Barker & Rasmussen (2000), pp. 139-140. Forsythe (2005), p. 49.

⁵ Barker & Rasmussen (2000), pp. 143-149.

⁶ Barker & Rasmussen (2000), pp. 130-131.

⁷ Cornell (1995), pp. 151-172.

⁸ Cornell (1995), p. 157.

⁹ Cornell (1995), pp. 202-204. Forsythe (2005), pp. 115-117.

¹⁰ Which coincides with the end of the regal period and the beginning of the republic (traditionally dated to 509 BC). Cornell (1995), p. 205.

¹¹ Cornell (1995, pp. 85-92) argues that many or most of the benefits that have traditionally been assigned to Etruscan influence were in fact indigenous Roman or borrowed directly from the Greeks, without Etruscan intermediaries. His arguments are persuasive but contradict the conventional view of Romano-Etruscan relationships which tended to derive almost every aspect of Roman culture from Etruscan influence or even domination. Forsythe (2005, pp. 117-121) generally supports Cornell's reappraisal of Etruscan influence on Rome, although he doesn't go as far in rejecting them.

¹² Cornell (1995), p. 184.

¹³ Cornell (1995), p. 148-149.

¹⁴ Cornell (1995), p. 122-127.

¹⁵ Cornell (1995), p. 194.

¹⁶ This is based on Cornell's reconstruction (1995, pp. 173-197). For a brief overview of Roman assemblies, see Crawford (1992), pp. 194-97. See also Forsythe (2005), pp. 108-115, 177-183.

¹⁷ Cornell (1995), p. 197.

¹⁸ A possible alternative would have been a *bonapartist* regime but this would have cut the expansion short. Of course, Roman expansion finally ended soon after the introduction of imperial monarchy which initially bore a strong resemblance to bonapartist regimes.

¹⁹ Crawford (1992), pp. 1, 25, 29, 104-105, 123-125 and *passim*. Potter (2004), p. 69-70.

²⁰ Polybius II, 24.

²¹ Cornell (1995), pp. 293-309.

²² Cornell (1995), pp. 252-256.

²³ Cornell (1995), pp. 269-270.

²⁴ Cornell (1995), pp. 258-265.

²⁵ Cornell (1995), pp. 268-271. Oakley (2004), p. 21.

²⁶ Cornell (1995), pp. 309-313. Forsythe (2005), pp. 246-251.

²⁷ Oakley (2004), p. 27.

²⁸ McEvedy & Jones (1978), pp. 18, 107, 113.

²⁹ The reconstruction below is mostly based on Hopkins (1978) and Crawford (1992) but with some change of emphasis.

³⁰ Hopkins (1978, p. 35) estimated that in the early 2nd century BC, over half of Roman citizens served in the army for about seven years.

³¹ Sallust, 41-42. Polybius VI, 11-18. Potter (2004), p. 73.

³² Agricultural slaves were usually male and celibate. Hopkins (1978), p. 106. On the manumission of slaves, see Hopkins (1978), pp. 115-132.

³³ According to Hopkins (1978, pp. 99-100), there are only five known societies that can truly be called *slave societies*, which he defines as societies where slaves play an important part in production and constitute more than say 20% of the population. Apart from Roman Italy, these include Athens and other parts of ancient Greece, and in the early modern period, the West Indies, Brazil and southern states of the USA.

³⁴ Plutarch, *Lives*, Tiberius Gracchus, 8-9. Cf. Hopkins (1978), pp. 58-59.

³⁵ For the Licinio-Sextian laws see Cornell (1995), pp. 327-44. Forsythe (2005), pp. 262-267.

³⁶ Crawford (1992), pp. 96-97, 112.

³⁷ For a discussion on the Gracchi in relation to socio-economic developments, see Hopkins (1978), pp. 56-64.

³⁸ Keppie (1998), pp. 61-62.

³⁹ Potter (2004), pp. 80-83. Crawford (1992), pp. 124-126. Keppie (1998, p. 62) downplays Marius' role in these changes.

⁴⁰ Crawford (1992), pp. 179-180.

⁴¹ Although the process was instigated by Marius, it was only completed by the creation of a fully professional army under Augustus. Campbell (2002), pp. 4-9, 22-25. Keppie (1998), pp. 145-148.

⁴² Hopkins (1978), p. 95.

⁴³ Campbell (2002), p. 71. Cf. Ward-Perkins (2005), p. 37.

⁴⁴ Livy, *Periochae*, 67.

⁴⁵ See e.g. Todd (2004), pp. 44-45.

⁴⁶ Sing. *oppidum*. This is a Latin term which simply means town and was used by Caesar for Gallic towns or cities and has become traditional in this sense.

⁴⁷ Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* VI, 14. See also Cunliffe (1999), pp. 217-218, 223-224, 230-232; Champion & Champion (1986), pp. 64-68; Büchsenschütz (1995), p. 61; Wells (1995); Wells (1999), pp. 32-33; Wells (2001), pp. 84-95; Wells (2005), pp. 56-59.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Collis (2003), p. 105; Collis (1995); Wells (1995); Wells (1999), pp. 48-56. A dissident view is provided by Haselgrove (1995), although his argument is handicapped by his failure to differentiate clearly between *complex chieftoms* and states. However, his argument is interesting because he suggests that what has been called statehood in Gaul is actually just one end of a recurring cycle in chieftom societies between contraction and expansion or remilitarization/dehierarchization and demilitarization/rehierarchization. This has a certain resonance with the ideas presented in this book, although I think that such cycles should not be

presented as automatic structural characteristics of chiefdoms. What Haselgrove apparently fails to realize is that chiefdoms do not inhabit another reality than states, and hierarchization can in fact lead to statehood, even without stimulation from already existing state civilizations.

⁴⁹ An alternative interpretation of the collapse of the oppida east of the Rhine is presented by Wells (1999, pp. 77-85), who suggests it was caused by the collapse of trade with the west during the Roman conquest of Gaul. Such an interpretation seems to place far too much importance on commerce in the ancient semi-barbarian economy and recalls similar ideas about the fall of Hallstatt (cf. above pp. 88-91).

⁵⁰ Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* V, 3; VII, 4. Champion & Champion (1986), pp. 67-68. See also Wells (1999), pp. 130-132. For the similar assimilation of the local elite in Roman Britain see Faulkner (2004), pp. 30-35.

⁵¹ See also Wells (1999), pp. 91-92. In his words, "...it was the very underdevelopment of the lands of northern Germany, relative to Gaul and Germany south of the Danube that made them impossible for the Romans to conquer..." (p. 92).

⁵² E.g. Todd (2004), pp. 46-48. I use the term Germania, in the same sense that the Romans did, for those parts of Europe occupied by Germanic tribes. This is not the same as modern Germany as Germania included, for example, most of Scandinavia and large parts of Central and Eastern Europe where Slavic languages are spoken today.

⁵³ The site of the battle was recently discovered at Kalkrise, near Osnabrück in the northern part of modern Germany. This has greatly improved our knowledge of the battle. See Wells (2003) for a vivid reconstruction. See also e.g. Todd (2004), pp. 48-53.

⁵⁴ Suetonius II, 23.

⁵⁵ Tacitus, *Annales* I, 11. Keppie (1998), p. 172. Wells (2003), pp. 202-203.

6. GERMANIC EXPANSION AND THE FALL OF ROME

The atrocities of 20th century racism, the worst of which wrapped itself in Germanic myths and traditions, have left a lingering distaste for Germanic conquerors. Many of us have a tendency to see the Germans of the Great Migrations as sorts of prehistoric Nazis. The 2004 film *King Arthur* tried (and failed) to portray a more historically accurate version of the Arthurian legend. It presents the Saxon king Cerdic (there really was a Saxon king by this name) as a Hitlerian pre-incarnation, a tyrant obsessed with racial purity who does not stop at killing one of his own men for raping a Briton woman, not out of compassion for the victim, but rather because their Saxon blood would be “watered down” through mixing with “these people”, an interesting argument considering that Cerdic’s own name was British. Needless to say, this depiction is simply the antithesis of Nazi prejudice and just as senseless.

We do not usually have the same prejudice against Gallic, Roman, Greek or even Viking conquerors, and the Germans of the Migration Period were no more racist than any of these. All of them may have been somewhat chauvinistic at the height of their success, but the Germans were probably less so than the Romans or the Greeks who also had the luxury of looking down their noses at most of their opponents for being uncivilized. The ancient Germans were not Nazis and they were not racists. They were just one people of many that went through the shocking experience of an expansion cycle.

However, Germanic expansion was unusual in one respect. At its height it clashed violently with another expanding group, the Romans. Just as the Romans were unable to overcome the Germans, the Germans could not defeat the Romans – at least not for a while. The collision of these expanding societies brought an end to both expansions with profound but very different implications for both of them. Not only was the Germanic expansion stopped by the Romans, but the threat of Roman domination and conquest immediately emerged. Instead of gradual elitization with rising elites and stratification, the Germanic tribes had to respond to an urgent challenge that endangered their economic and political freedom at a time when they still possessed effective popular armies. The result was an interrupted but repeatedly renewed expansion that played itself out in three distinct waves stretched out over 7 or 8 centuries.

Early Expansion

The Nordic Bronze Age culture covered southern and central Scandinavia and northern Germany and lasted until about 500 BC. Iron had been known since around 1000 BC but it was still difficult to produce and expensive and the northern elite apparently had little use for it, preferring to continue to rely on bronze. This may indicate that the northern elite was secure in power in its homeland and that there was little internal competition capable of producing dynamic change. Perhaps there was even some sort of political network or alliance that ensured peace and stability.¹ The North was stratified, conservative and stable, but all this changed abruptly around 500 BC.

The Nordic Bronze Age is considered to end and the Iron Age to begin at this time, but not because iron suddenly replaced bronze. Even if bronze became scarce, iron also remained rare for another two centuries. The main change at the beginning of the Iron Age was that archaeological remains suddenly become very much poorer. This has sometimes been interpreted as an effect of climatic deterioration but in recent years other explanations have prevailed, most of them involving the decline of the Bronze Age chiefs and a rise of an egalitarian society in the North. The reasons for these changes are no doubt complex but scholars have, besides mentioning environmental changes, evoked the cessation of bronze imports and altered settlement and production patterns.² There is no doubt that the bronze trade was interrupted and settlement remains indicate smaller nuclear families with more intensive farming and significant population growth. But these are really only symptoms of the changes that were taking place and do not explain them.³

The reader may have already noticed that the symptoms of the transformation around 500 BC are reminiscent of expansion cycles. We have strong indications of egalitarianism replacing the old stratification and intensification in farming, with small but productive nuclear families. In these circumstances, population growth is what we have come to expect. The cessation of bronze imports is then easily explained by the collapse of the old elite, the main user of bronze, and the general disruption that often accompanies expansion cycles. At the same time, it is fairly certain that the Nordic Bronze Age did not produce an expansion by itself, as there are few indications of the intense competition that we usually find at their roots and little or no evidence of expansion from the north at this time. This leaves the possibility that the Nordic area was affected by an expansion cycle that began somewhere else but then spread its influence to the North and transformed its society.

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We know that an expansion cycle was going on in Central Europe among the Gauls around 450 BC and it isn't hard to imagine that it may have started 50 or more years earlier with expansion in the direction of the least resistance – against the uncompetitive and fragile elite domination of the North. Clear archaeological evidence is not to be found but migrations are often hard to detect, especially when they involve close neighbours. However, it is clear that the Germans of the Early Iron Age were under heavy Celtic or Gallic influence as shown for example by numerous *torcs* or neck rings found in their area but normally associated with Celtic populations.⁴ If there was such a Gallic or Celtic expansion to the north, its ethnic identity was lost or transformed somewhere along the way since it is certain that Celtic languages did not generally replace Germanic ones, although this may have happened to some extent. If the old Nordic elite fell effortlessly under the onslaught of the Gauls, large areas would suddenly open up where Gallic immigrants could settle among the Germans. They may then have cultivated the support of the local commoners, perhaps assuming leadership as a minority that was gradually assimilated.

Support for this scenario can be found in evidence that indicates that the northern transformation did not reach all of the Nordic area at the same time. To the west of the river Oder and in southwest Scandinavia it occurred during the Hallstatt D1 period (6th century BC), but about a hundred years later east of the Oder and in eastern Scandinavia.⁵ It is as if the expansion was halted as it reached a line running from the Oder through southwest Scandinavia, and the communities to the north and east continued to trade with Central Europe and display evidence of wealth, while the southwest turned egalitarian, introduced large undifferentiated cemeteries and evolved the distinct Jastorf culture which covered northwest Germany and most of Jutland.⁶ The northeast followed suit in the 5th century, presumably as a response to the challenge from the southwest, which could only be met by emulating the new social and military structures that had been introduced there.

Of course, it is hardly possible to accurately reconstruct political developments in the Early Iron Age but it is at least evident that warfare and conflict was on the rise. It seems likely that the transformation around 500 BC, whether caused by Gallic incursions or something else, set the Germanic world on a path of egalitarianism, population growth and intensified competition. The old elite was probably severely reduced or even abolished altogether at the beginning of the Iron Age, bringing the common people more freedom to start their own families and acquire land. The result was a

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substantial internal colonization and population expansion, with more intensive land use that soon started to fill up the landscape.

This internal expansion did not immediately spill over as migrations and conquests into neighbouring territories. In the meantime, archaeology provides us with some glimpses of Nordic developments. The most spectacular find from this time is the Hjortspring boat sacrifice from late 4th century BC Denmark. The sacrifice was of a longboat and the equipment of a small army, probably that of defeated invaders. The equipment indicates an elite group of warriors, but one whose method of fighting was that of a close order infantry reminiscent of the Greek hoplites.⁷ The defeated invaders who lost their equipment and perhaps their lives at Hjortspring were not a popular army, but they do testify to the presence of massed infantry in Northern Europe. Massed infantry is essentially the tactic of most early popular armies and its confirmed presence makes popular armies a distinct possibility close by in terms of both time and space. The Hjortspring defenders that defeated the invaders may even have been such a force. However, the elite nature of the Hjortspring attackers may also indicate that a certain elitization had taken place since the beginning of the Iron Age, perhaps confined to the southwest in the Jastorf area. Egalitarianism emerged here earlier than in the northeast, and in the absence of expansive opportunities a social situation conducive to a new rise of elitism may have been reached sooner.

At about the same time as the people of Hjortspring were consigning the gear of their defeated enemies to the ground, a Greek from Massilia (Marseilles) visited Northern Europe. His name was Pytheas and he wrote about his travels in the north but nothing, alas, remains of his work apart from a few quotations picked up by other authors, some of whom ridiculed him for his tall tales. He mentions two northern peoples, Teutones and Gutones, and it seems possible (though far from certain) that these names were applied to the contesting groups created by Gallic expansion. Teutones would then be the group that formed in the southwest under Gallic or Celtic influence, while the Gutones emerged as a native response in the northeast.⁸ The split between these groups can perhaps be discerned in archaeological finds down to the beginning of the 1st millennium AD.⁹ The difficulty in finding a truly original common designation for the early Germans may be explained by this rift since, even if the language remained the same or similar for both groups, their identity was torn asunder around 500 BC and only gradually merged again.¹⁰

It is only around the early years of the 3rd century BC that iron-working really comes into its own in Germania. Weapons made of iron

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now become relatively common and we even see the beginning of its use in everyday utensils. It may very well be that this intensification in metallurgy was related to increased competition and the emergence of popular armies that had to be adequately equipped, and thus stimulated iron production in general.

It was perhaps around this time, and certainly no later than towards the end of the 3rd century BC, that Germanic expansion began. The egalitarianism that was brought to the North at the beginning of the Iron Age prompted population growth, which both stimulated and fed on new farming technologies. By the 3rd century BC the land was filling up, and some of this growth started to spill over at the same time as Gallic expansion was drawing to its close. Shortly before 200 BC, two migrating tribes, the Bastarnae and the Scirii, appeared north of the Danube on the Black Sea coast, threatening Greek colonies. The Scirii were certainly Germanic but the Bastarnae may have been something else or a mixture of some kind.¹¹ These were the first Germanic peoples to come into contact with the classical world and their arrival indicates that some expansion was already taking place, perhaps mainly to the southeast although this is difficult to verify with archaeology. The Przeworsk culture was formed in southern Poland around this time, a culture that almost certainly produced the Germanic tribe of the Vandals at a later date.

Some indication may also be gleaned from names. There are four large islands in the southern Baltic, east of The Sound. These are (from west to east) Rügen, Bornholm (Old Norse: Borgundarhólmr), Öland and Gotland. In Tacitus' account of Germania from 98 AD, we find the names of three important Germanic tribes *south* of the Baltic that correspond closely with three of the island names. These are the Rugians, Burgundians and Goths. While we cannot claim with absolute certainty that each of these tribes came from the respective island, the evidence is hard to ignore when taken as a whole. It would be too much of a coincidence if all of these tribes just happened to have names that match those of the Baltic islands by pure chance.

The suspicion of population movements from the Baltic to the southeastern interior is strengthened by the stories told by many of these tribes. Best known are the tales of the Goths that claim that they came from the island of Scandza, which could mean Scandinavia rather than Gotland specifically.¹² The Lombards also claimed Scandinavian origins.¹³ We know about these claims because, unlike most of the migrating peoples, the Goths and the Lombards had their own written histories, but it is quite possible that many others claimed Scandinavian origins.

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Most of the tribes encountered by the emigrants were no doubt very similar to them. Some even spoke Germanic dialects. This would make it especially difficult to trace the migration through archaeology. We should keep in mind that the migrations of expansion cycles do not only, or even necessarily, signify a major change in language and population. More importantly, they mark a change in social structure in which a relatively egalitarian society supplants a stratified one. The new egalitarian culture has the capacity to incorporate most of the native population as well as much of its culture, and the indigenous language may even prevail in the long run. Equally important is the disruptive social upheaval from which the emigrants emerged, which may have served to sever cultural ties and continuity. Therefore, we should not expect the emigrant societies to be exact replicas of the societies from which they came.

The evidence for an early Germanic expansion commencing in the 3rd century BC is largely circumstantial, but some of it indicates an origin in southern Scandinavia. One may speculate that this had something to do with this area being the interaction zone between the southwest, which first adopted egalitarian practices perhaps through Gallic or Celtic influence, and the northeast, which only did so a century later, probably in response to the challenge from the southwest. This is where the competition would have been the fiercest, and where land-hungry warrior-farmers would have proliferated and produced expansion most quickly. The landscape of islands and peninsulas may also have played a part. Settlements were hemmed in by sea and new land was not readily available. However, the same sea that confined the population also provided easy transport to new lands across it.

At first, the early Germanic expansion seems to have moved mostly to the southeast. The Polish plain promised rich opportunities for settlement and there was probably less resistance here than among the Gauls or Celts further to the west who still possessed strong popular armies. As the expansion pushed through Poland, probably beginning around the mid 3rd century as indicated by the movements of the Scirii and Bastarnae, it would have assimilated most of the previous population. Some of these people were already Germanic but others spoke different Indo-European languages, possibly Baltic and Slavic and probably Venedic.¹⁴ All these peoples merged into Germanic speaking, initially egalitarian tribes that later surfaced from the written sources as Goths, Vandals, Burgundians and others.

About a 100 years after the Bastarnae and the Scirii appeared in the south, the Mediterranean civilizations witnessed the dramatic

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migrations of the Cimbri and Teutones from the Jutland peninsula, ending only in their defeat at the hands of the Romans in 102 and 101 BC (chapter 5). The same phase also seems to have brought Germanic tribes to the lower Rhine, where they merged with the previous population (probably Gallic or in some sense Celtic) and may have acquired the name *Germans* from them in the process.¹⁵

In the 1st century BC, it was the Suebic tribes who were expanding most conspicuously.¹⁶ Originating from central Germania, they moved to the south and southwest. Some of them even crossed the Upper Rhine and, under the inspired leadership of Ariovistus, briefly became a powerful force in Gaul until a defeat at the hands of the Romans in 58 BC effectively confined them to the east of the river. As Rome was conquering the Gauls, Germans were expanding to meet them, and this was the threat from which Caesar claimed to be saving the Gauls.¹⁷ For the next half century the expansion concentrated on southern Germany and Bohemia, assimilating or driving out the previous Gallic or Celtic inhabitants. The oppida in this area fell and were abandoned one after another as simple, egalitarian Germanic societies replaced the complex, stratified Celtic ones.

As Romans came into close contact with Germans from around 100 BC, we have several written sources that illuminate Germanic customs and organization. All show signs of an expansion cycle either still in progress or recently ended.

First of all, Roman sources make clear that the Germanic peoples, like other competitive systems, were not a unified political body. On the contrary, they were divided into a large number of tribes or peoples. The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus wrote a description of Germania in 98 AD, which is our most valued source on the early Germans. In it, he enumerated the many Germanic tribes inhabiting the rather vaguely defined area the Romans called Germania, noting their peculiarities as well as giving a general description of their society, customs and traditions. From his account we can draw a map of the political divisions of Germania with considerable accuracy, although Tacitus is not equally well informed about all parts of the region. From his description it is clear that Germania was a patchwork of many different peoples, none of which was in a dominating position, and these peoples were almost constantly at war with each other and no strangers to the making and breaking of alliances.¹⁸ Many of the groups mentioned are also known from other sources. Some, like the Goths, Lombards, Burgundians or Angles, reappeared in the Great Migrations of the 5th and 6th centuries AD, illustrating the stability and longevity of these units. In other cases, nations like the Saxons, Franks and Alamanni are first mentioned in

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the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD and emerged as permanent alliances between earlier groups.

Tacitus' account also indicates a similar culture and social structure throughout Germania and this is corroborated by archaeology, although some regional differences are apparent. Most importantly, the Germans in the time of Tacitus all spoke the same language or closely related dialects, facilitating communication and the spread of ideas and technology. Germania was thus a fairly well-defined cultural and political entity and, as in other competitive systems, the population probably had a dual identity, the inner identity of the tribe and the outer identity of the Germans, even if the latter is somewhat problematic.¹⁹ It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the Germanic peoples of Tacitus' time, and probably for some centuries previously, constituted a competitive system, and the obvious expansion cycle of the Germanic peoples supports this.

Militarization, the first element of an expansion cycle, is not hard to spot among the early Germans. It seems evident among the migrating Cimbri and Teutones, and Caesar makes clear the warlike character of the Germans in the middle of the 1st century BC.²⁰ Tacitus briefly describes their methods of fighting, emphasising the importance of infantry and the simple equipment of the common warrior, both indicative of a popular army.²¹ The sheer size of German armies in relation to their population also makes it clear that they must have included just about every able-bodied freeman, even allowing for Roman exaggerations. The Germans also developed a special kind of infantry formation mentioned by Tacitus, that of drawing their battle-line up in a series of wedge-shaped formations. Not much is known about how this worked in practice but it must have been effective since it became a fixture in Germanic warfare for more than a thousand years, being last mentioned in late 13th century Norway.²² Loss of one's shield was considered a great disgrace, which is reminiscent of the hoplite ethos of ancient Greece. All of this points to close infantry formations, the type of warfare that was usually practised by effective popular armies in the ancient world.

The second element, democratization, is also obvious. The Germans guarded their freedom jealously and even Arminius, the hero of Teutoburg Forest who had delivered them from the Roman grasp, was eventually killed by his own compatriots because they resented his ambitions to raise himself up as king.²³ In expansion cycles, democratization tends to result in egalitarianism as the enfranchised people demand a larger share of the communal wealth. Caesar describes how the Germans redistributed their farming land annually. Although this is probably an exaggeration or

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misunderstanding and certainly does not apply to all the Germans, the way in which he claims that they justified this custom is informative, including:

that they may not be anxious to acquire large estates, and the strong be tempted to dispossess the weak; [...] and to keep the common people contented and quiet by letting every man see that even the most powerful are no better off than himself.²⁴

Caesar's description of the Germans may not generally be very accurate, but if this passage has any foundation at all, it indicates a fiercely egalitarian society, acutely aware that equality was not something that could be taken for granted, and this is clearly in keeping with a democratization process. Tacitus mentions the poverty of the Germans, by which he probably means the lack of wealthy individuals. He also describes how a young man became a full member of society when he was presented with arms and how the major decisions of the tribe were made at assemblies of the armed population, both of which indicate a militarized and democratic warrior-society.²⁵

Slavery, of course, existed among the early Germans, but apart from that, class distinctions appear little pronounced. Wealth was mostly counted in cattle and the wealthiest served as cavalry in war, but in general there seems to have been little social stratification in the times of Caesar and Tacitus. This is broadly confirmed by archaeology, especially for those living near the Roman border, with more signs of stratification in the central part of Germania (next section).

If the picture painted here of the beginning of Germanic expansion is correct, it was in one respect rather unusual, although how unusual is hard to say. It would appear that early Germanic expansion did not begin through a gradual build-up of conflict in a competitive system eventually leading to the formation of popular armies. Rather, it seems to have been a reaction to Gallic expansion and to have inherited Gallic egalitarianism from the moment of impact or soon after. As a result, it seems to be an early example of the way in which an expansion cycle can export itself and, through a chain reaction, be recreated in adjacent territories after a certain period of time. A partial equivalent would be the expansion still going on in the 'Third World' as a reaction to Western expansion (chapter 9). In the Germanic case, the Gallic impact introduced the conditions of expansion into a society that was nowhere near to producing those conditions by itself. Not only did the Gauls bring egalitarianism and popular armies but also the political competition that fuelled further

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changes. It is even possible that Germanic expansion was held in check for some time by the expansive pressure from the Gauls; that only the cessation of Gallic expansion in the 3rd century BC finally unleashed its full force.

Elitization and Statehood

By the end of the last century BC, a line had been drawn along the Rhine and the upper Danube separating the Celts under Roman rule and the Germans to the north and east. By this time, of course, the Romans were venturing to conquer the Germans as well, and although their plans fell apart after their defeat in Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD, they did at least put an end to early Germanic expansion. In the 1st century AD, the eastern limit of Germanic settlements seems to have lain close to the Vistula, along the Carpathian Mountains and through Moravia to the Danube. There was also an offshoot to the southeast, in modern Moldavia or thereabouts, a remnant of the early expansion of the Bastarnae and Scirii.²⁶ For a while expansion ceased and, as always occurs in these situations, elitization emerged. This happened first furthest away from the expanding frontier in areas far away from any expansive opportunities, and began while the Suebi were still expanding in the south.

According to archaeology, the 1st century BC saw the emergence of social stratification in Scandinavia.²⁷ From this time on we find a clear hierarchy in settlement remains along with a sudden re-appearance of rich graves, which had been practically unknown since around 500 BC.²⁸ This amounts to the beginning of elitization, as usually happens when an expansion cycle dies down. As land again becomes scarce, demand exceeds supply and those who have more than others can start capitalizing on this fundamental asset by distributing it in return for some form of compensation. These men can then use their privileged position to acquire still more land and a hierarchy of wealth thus takes shape, which quickly translates into a hierarchy of power. Hierarchization often leads to statehood and there are indications that this may even have happened in parts of Germania.

In the early centuries AD, burial practices seem to indicate social position. Cremation had been the norm for some time but inhumations now appear in some places, and since they are generally richer than the cremation graves, they probably indicate a tendency among the emerging elite to set themselves apart from the rest.²⁹ Most remarkable of these are the 'princely graves', *Fürstengräber*,

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especially the so-called Lübsow type of the 1st and early 2nd century AD. Not only far richer than others, these graves also display common characteristics over their whole area of distribution, indicating a unified elite culture and substantial Roman influence among this social group. This is in marked contrast with the graves of the common people, which show significant regional variations. The Lübsow graves were distributed over the heartland of the Germanic tribes but were conspicuously absent from most of the Roman border, especially along the Rhine. Some are known from Bohemia but are considered peripheral, whereas there is something “approaching a concentration” around the western Baltic.³⁰ This distribution may indicate that, in the 1st and early 2nd centuries AD, elitization was more pronounced among the central tribes than along the Roman border. There also is a clear correlation between the distance from the Roman border and the nature of Roman imports in Germania. Everyday articles, such as brooches and pottery, are most commonly found along the boundaries, but luxury items made of glass, bronze or silver are rarely found within 200 km of it. Beyond this limit, however, they are much more common, which would seem to indicate their use by a well-off social elite.³¹ This seems to fit well with indications that these central tribes had not only evolved economic disparity but also displayed a more hierarchical political organization. One of these indications is the development of writing in the Germanic world.

In the 2nd century AD *runes* appear for the first time in our archaeological material, a Germanic system of writing seemingly designed for carving on wood. The oldest preserved inscriptions are certainly not the oldest ever carved and the runologist Erik Moltke estimated that they were invented in southern Scandinavia, most probably Zealand or Scania, around the birth of Christ, give or take 50-100 years.³² Curiously, this writing system, although based on Latin precedence (or perhaps rather that of related north Italian alphabets), did not appear in the immediate vicinity of the Roman Empire or the classical world. Instead it first appeared in southern Scandinavia, at a considerable distance from the Roman border, right in the heart of the Germanic world. So why did runes appear in this relatively remote location instead of the Rhineland or along the Danube?

It is still occasionally claimed that runes were not a ‘real’ writing system but rather a magical tool used for divination and suchlike. However, the reputation of runes as instruments of the occult was only established after they had been replaced in Northern Europe by the Latin alphabet and had thus become symbols of ancient mysteries.

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Early runic inscriptions do not show any preoccupation with the supernatural, although all writing systems seem a little magical in their ability to convey meaning without the spoken word and most or all have been subject to occult usage at one time or another. This use, however, is secondary to the neutral transmission of meaning and, as the development of writing normally follows the formation of states (pp. 30-32 above), the question must arise as to whether the invention of runes in southern Scandinavia around the birth of Christ signifies the formation of a state in that area. This may appear far-fetched, given the general reluctance of the early Germans to organize states, especially if one adheres to the questionable notion that statehood is something that must be learned from more 'advanced' neighbours. It would then be absurd for a state to form deep in barbarian Europe, rather than along the Roman frontier so much closer to the 'source'. However, it is no more absurd than the creation of a writing system in this location and if states come into existence simply as response to local conditions, it all makes perfect sense.³³

Basically, states are complex organizations that are capable of dealing with complex situations. Societies do not normally develop states until something calls for them because they are costly and, at least to some extent, oppressive since they invariably limit their subjects' freedom of action. However, their organizing quality is often beneficial, especially when society is faced with complicated problems, such as when social complexities are growing beyond control or if there is a need for highly organized defence. Some such situation may have arisen in or around Denmark in the 1st century BC or AD at a time when we know that stratification was on the rise. Although we cannot discern its precise reason or the nature of this possible state-building process, the archaeological remains indicate a higher level of social stratification, with greater concentration of wealth in Denmark than in the rest of the Germanic world.³⁴ This could be indicative of a state-building process. The Danish Isles were situated at a crossroads where trade and influence from many directions coalesced and their maritime position facilitated contact rather than impaired it. This situation could be conducive to social complexities, giving rise to state-building, or could emphasize the need for maritime defence which, because of the unpredictability of coastal raids and the expense of maintaining longboats, would call for better organization.

Here, at the heart of the Germanic world and probably close to the centre of the early expansion phase that began in the 3rd century BC, the end of expansion would have been felt earlier than along the edges. The people of the Danish Isles were more or less surrounded by other Germanic tribes in a state of expansion, severely limiting their

own options, and their island localities would have aggravated their confinement. Therefore, we should expect elitization to emerge earlier in this area than elsewhere in Germania, and elitization was often the first step towards state formation.

Apart from the invention of runes, there is some other evidence for state formation in early Scandinavia. In his *Germania*, Tacitus meticulously enumerates the Germanic peoples and their approximate positions. In Scandinavia (apart from Jutland), a region the Romans thought of as an extended archipelago, he only names a single clearly Germanic tribe, the Suiones.³⁵ Their name corresponds exactly to the historically attested name of the medieval *Svear* of central Sweden around Uppsala and Stockholm that made up the core of the Swedish state and gave their name to modern Sweden and the Swedes. Quite naturally, scholars have assumed Tacitus' Suiones to be the direct ancestors of the *Svear* and for this reason have usually placed them in central Sweden. However, this would leave a very significant void in southern Sweden and the Danish Isles where no tribes at all are mentioned, even though this area should have been better known to the Romans than the more distant parts of Sweden. Why would Tacitus mention the remote *Svear* but have nothing to say about their southern neighbours, who we know through archaeology were in close contact with the Romans, much closer contact in fact than most other peoples of the Germanic interior?

The only thing Tacitus actually says about the location of the Suiones is that they lived "right out in the sea" which can hardly mean anything other than that they were island dwellers. Without the linguistic evidence connecting the names of the Suiones and the *Svear*, we would probably have assumed them to have lived on the Danish Isles. Tacitus significantly speaks of the "states [*civitates*] of the Suiones". His use of a word that can be translated as 'state' is not important, because his notion of what this signifies may have been widely different from our own. His use of the plural, however, is significant. There was not just one political division of the Suiones but many. This has to mean that Tacitus uses the term Suiones as a collective noun encompassing several tribes or sub-tribes, each with its own political identity. Thus, we can interpret the term Suiones, as used by Tacitus, as a collective term for most or all Scandinavians (except the Jutlanders). In applying the name in this manner, Tacitus may have misunderstood the political situation in Scandinavia but perhaps he was right and the term was actually used for the population of the Danish Isles, southern and central Sweden and even more. This hypothesis gains some support from the fact that the

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Danes, when first mentioned, are said to have been of Swedish origin.³⁶

It seems that Tacitus' description of the Suiones may very well apply to all parts of Scandinavia known to the Romans (minus Jutland), but especially to the parts they knew most about, which would be the Danish Isles. This is important, because according to the description in *Germania*, the polities of the Suiones had much greater central authority than those of other Germans.

Wealth, too, is held in high honour; and so a single monarch rules, with no restrictions on his power and with an unquestioned claim to obedience. Arms are not, as in the rest of Germany, allowed to all and sundry, but are kept in charge of a custodian – who is in fact a slave. There are two reasons for this control of weapons: the sea makes sudden invasion impossible, and idle crowds of armed men easily get into mischief. As for not putting any noble or freeman, or even freedman, in charge of the arms – that is part of royal policy.³⁷

In this passage, Tacitus seems to be discussing a single rather than multiple monarchies but there is little doubt that, according to him, at least one of the Suionic polities was a well-ordered state with a strong government and a system of officials, and that this polity was far better organized than those on the Roman border. Such a state might have had its political centre close to Hoby on the island of Lolland, where archaeology has revealed huge concentration of wealth at this time. Of course we can question Tacitus' accuracy, but if his description applies more to the Danish Isles than to remote central Sweden then there is less reason to doubt him. In fact, the archaeological connection between the Danish Isles and the Roman Empire is such that we have every reason to believe that Tacitus would have been able to acquire accurate information from this area.

The evidence seems almost conclusive. The presence of runes and Tacitus' report indicate developing statehood in southern Scandinavia, at the time when the early Germanic expansion had spent itself here at the centre. Why, then, did this only happen in Scandinavia at this time and not elsewhere in Germania, and did these states or proto-states survive? If we believe in the formation of states as a 'progressive' step in social evolution, being disseminated from Mediterranean civilization, we would expect states in the Germanic world to form first along the Roman border and then gradually spread to the north and east, without significant reversal of the process. In fact, nothing of the sort happened and such beliefs should be discarded. Instead, we should try to explain developments

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towards statehood among the early Germans, or a lack thereof, by reference to the Germanic expansion cycle and elitization.

As mentioned earlier, the development of a state always infringes on some existing freedoms. Weber defined the (modern) state as having a monopoly of the use of force, and, although this does not apply to early states, most of them tried to improve their control of the use of force within their borders. This certainly increased security but, at the same time, limited the individual's freedom of action. States also require administrative systems with paid officials, and the cost of maintaining them inevitably fell on the common people. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, territorial states that covered tens of thousands of square kilometres were not intrinsically democratic. This was not a problem for the Greek city-states because of their limited size and concentrated population that allowed the majority to come together frequently and partake in decision-making. However, as soon as they grew beyond this size, and particularly if the population was thinly spread over the landscape as it was in most barbarian polities, maintaining a democratic government became a problem since the sophisticated administration and record-keeping of modern democracies and their concentrated power did not exist. Direct democracy worked reasonably well in small ancient city-states but was totally unsuitable for larger territorial states where there was no possibility of direct involvement of the population in all the necessary decision-making. Representative democracies had to await both the development of much more formidable bureaucracies to ensure fairness and the rule of law, and the coercive power of the modern state to enforce decisions taken without the direct involvement of the democratized populace, some of whom might otherwise simply refuse to accept them. In Rome, the limited democratic developments that took place under the Republic were reversed, as Rome became an empire, impossible to rule by democratic means. It is significant that this transformation took place with considerable popular support and the rule of Caesar and Augustus had something of a bonapartist character. Their bonapartist regime did bring some benefits to the people but was, of course, quickly transformed into a commonplace elitist regime.

These principles also apply to the Germanic barbarians. When they came into contact with Rome, they were going through their expansion cycle and their social structure and organization was highly democratic. As they clashed with Rome, they could probably have used the better organization that a state would provide. Of course, establishing city-states, which might have been democratic, was not an option. Given the relatively small and dispersed population, the

only possibility was territorial tribal states. But here is the catch. Because of their undemocratic nature, early territorial states were not easily compatible with democratic warrior societies. Building states in Germania in the 1st century BC might have enabled a greater concentration of materials and men and a more sustained war effort against the Romans. However, the warrior-farmers, still the main military power in their society, were not likely to give up their participation in the decision-making process in order to achieve this.

A short-term solution might have been to establish a bonapartist regime; to introduce an undemocratic state organization but still with popular support, as may have occurred in the Marcomannic kingdom of Marbod in early 1st century Bohemia. As he introduced Roman methods and military organization, Marbod did indeed become a powerful king and a very dangerous opponent. But bonapartist regimes tend to be short-lived as they either fail to fulfil the expectations of the people or degenerate into new elitist regimes. Either way, dictatorships with the active support of popular armies are definitely short-term phenomena, the fate of Marbod's kingdom being a case in point. In the end, he was expelled by his own people, who were just as glad to be free from his oppression as the Romans were to be rid of a troublesome neighbour, and he spent the rest of his depraved life under Roman protection.³⁸ As Marbod could not ride the wave of popular support except for a short while, his only chance of survival would have been to develop an elitist regime that would support his kingship. But an elitist regime would undermine the popular army and thus compromise the ability of the Marcomanni to defend themselves. Marbod's kingdom was probably doomed from the start – it was only a question of whether it fell through internal revolt or through external pressure as growing elitism eroded the popular army and the state's defences.

Even if temporary statehood could have been achieved in this way, there were also military disadvantages to consider. One was that a centralized state was more vulnerable to a concerted attack by the Romans. States usually have some centre of government in one place, like the Gallic oppida, and these were fixed points that the Romans could concentrate on conquering. Once they were conquered the state was inevitably weakened. Even a mobile government was vulnerable to capture, in which case there was a danger of the whole organization collapsing. In fact, the most important defensive strategy employed by the Germans was simply not to give the Romans the opportunity to fight large engagements, not providing them with a focal point for their offensives. Unless the situation was very favourable, the Germans usually evaded direct encounters with strong Roman

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armies, opting instead to evacuate their settlements as the Romans passed. Sooner or later the Romans had to turn back, whether they had come to grips with the enemy or not, and then the Germans returned and rebuilt their homes, which weren't very substantial anyway. Roman campaigning in Germania was therefore often like punching fog, with no purchase to be found. Nor was there a strong elite with vested interests, which the Romans could entice to their side as they had done in Gaul.³⁹

Individually, the Germanic peoples were too small to be able to copy Roman organization and compete continuously on an equal footing. Had they tried, the Romans would have had little trouble defeating them. Instead, they had to find different ways to survive in the shadow of the giant, rather as small animals that survive in the presence of a large one by keeping out of its way and using different survival strategies.

For the Germans, a state, with its tendency to undemocratic government and increased social stratification, could undermine the popular army, and those along the Rhine could not afford to disband their popular armies. They were caught in a perpetual expansion cycle maintained by a neighbour so powerful that the only way to survive was to retain the popular army and the social order that went with it. This is what Arminius' revolt of 9 AD was all about. But these border tribes competed not only with the Romans but also with other Germanic tribes further away, and, because the border tribes preserved their popular armies, their inland neighbours were obliged to do so as well or to revive them if they had begun to deteriorate. In this way, the Germanic expansion cycle bounced back from the Rhine and locked Germania in a condition of almost perpetual expansion.

If simple states managed to become established, as seems likely in southern Scandinavia, they were in danger of coming to an abrupt end as the renewal of the expansion cycle spread from the Roman border, bringing with it enhanced militarization and democratization. Under a state regime, the strengthening of an elite and the corresponding decline of the warrior-farmers would gradually undermine the greatest military asset of the Germanic world, the popular army. Therefore, a state, despite its organizational capabilities, would find itself at a disadvantage and be in danger of being conquered by less organized neighbours. It could even collapse in a kind of social revolution when the farmers, envious of the freedom enjoyed by other peoples, decided to get rid of it.

The state perhaps had one chance of survival in such circumstances. If the democratizing movement came under a bonapartist leadership it might suffice to maintain the structural

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integrity of the state apparatus. Even if it is a part of the democratization process, a bonapartist government is not democratic. Thus, it may be able to circumvent the decentralizing tendencies of democratization even without modern state organization and so preserve the state. In any case, bonapartist governments tend to be short-lived and usually either collapse as they fail to fulfil the demands of the populace or transform themselves into new elite regimes. This sort of thing may have happened far from the Roman border (next section) but along the Rhine and Danube, states probably had little chance of becoming established in the first place. If they did, as seems possible in the case of Marbod's Bohemia, they quickly collapsed as they simply couldn't survive under these exceptional conditions, characterized by democratization, extreme competition and the ever-lurking presence of the Roman giant.

The Germans were caught in the ongoing conflict with the Romans, which compelled them to keep on maximizing their military capabilities and maintaining the popular army, and prevented them from developing deep social stratification and all but the simplest states. It is no coincidence that the most democratic and egalitarian Germans were those in close contact with the Romans. Those living farther away were more likely to develop elites and kingdoms as demonstrated by archaeology as well as Tacitus' account.⁴⁰

Expanding from their original competitive system, the Germans were caught in a new system but of a different kind. We do not know enough to determine with any certainty what it was that originally spawned the Germanic competitive system, although some chain reaction from the Gallic expansion seems likely, but with the Roman collision, a clear *periphery system* was established (see p. 14), with the Romans in the role of the empire and the Germans in that of the competing periphery struggling to stay alive in spite of a powerful and aggressive neighbour. For several centuries, Romans and Germans were locked in perpetual battle. Since the Romans were not under the same pressure as the Germans and could in any case learn little from them because of the social differences, it was the Germans who gradually grew stronger, changing the balance of power until the Romans could no longer keep up. This was probably the same sort of thing that had previously occurred on the eve of the Urnfield and Gallic explosions, and also shows some resemblance to the Greco-Persian situation of the 5th and 4th centuries BC.

Expansion Renewed

The choice between becoming a Roman peasant or remaining a free farmer at the cost of having to fight for their freedom, would not have been difficult for most Germans. Therefore, the border tribes maintained their popular armies and this stimulated the tribes of the interior to revive theirs in order to keep up. Among the latter, elitization was reversed as the renewed popular army again brought power to the people who, as always, demanded land on which they could raise their families. Their societies thus became more egalitarian and more democratic. That this is the case is supported by the fact that the princely Lübsow graves disappeared in central Germania in the mid 2nd century AD, and richly furnished graves became a rarity in all of Germania in the late 2nd and the 3rd centuries AD.⁴¹ At exactly the same time, we learn through both archaeology and written sources that populations were on the move. By the mid 2nd century AD expansive pressure was building up in the heart of Germania and the Romans were soon to experience it at first hand.⁴²

The Goths played a key role in the events of the latter half of the 2nd century AD. While still living on the lower Vistula, Tacitus tells us that they were governed by kings and that their rule was somewhat more autocratic than among the other Germans.⁴³ Lübsow graves have been discovered in their territory and all this indicates that they were, in Tacitus' time, among the German tribes where elitization had progressed considerably, which is in keeping with their location far away from the Roman border. However, by the mid 2nd century AD something new was afoot.

The Goths are usually equated, more or less, with the archaeological Wielbark culture on the lower Vistula although this may have involved some other tribes as well. In the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, the density of Wielbark settlements seems to increase and in the middle of the 2nd century it starts to expand, first east of the Vistula but soon also to the south, at the expense of the Przeworsk culture. The latter probably involved various Germanic tribes, such as the Vandals, but there were substantial differences between the two indicating divergent ethnic identities and even antagonism. The expansion of Wielbark almost certainly involved substantial population movements, although there are indications that some of the indigenous population was assimilated and adopted the cultural markers, and presumably the identity, of the newcomers.⁴⁴

Even if the Goths played only a small part in the wars that erupted on the Danubian border from 166 AD, it has long been recognized that there is a causal link between these wars and Gothic

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population movements. It seems that the pressure on the Danube came from deep inside Germania and involved not only Goths but also many other tribes of the interior. Some, like the Lombards, moved right up to the borders at this time and breached them where they could. Others just put pressure on their neighbours and pushed them towards the empire. However, the most important mechanism of expansion was probably the way in which the development of egalitarian and expansive societies among the Goths and other central tribes stimulated similar developments among their neighbours. For example, as the Goths evolved popular armies their southern neighbours, the Vandals, would have been hard pressed to find responses that prevented their total destruction or assimilation. The only solution was to raise their own popular army. This allowed them not only to hold back the Goths but also to expand against weaker neighbours to the south. Such expansion was not only made possible by the popular army, but was also necessary in order to accommodate the land-hunger of warrior-farmers.

After the great confrontations of the early 1st century AD, some stability seems to have returned to the Roman boundary and the tribes living along it may have begun to settle down and even to experience the first signs of elitization. But the wave of expansion that had recoiled from Roman pressure on the Rhine and been rejuvenated in German resistance in Arminius' time, then bounced back from the interior to bludgeon the Romans on the Middle Danube. A resurgence of egalitarianism and popular armies swept across Germania from the mid 2nd century onwards and the expanding populations and swelling tribes put tremendous pressure on the Empire.

Although the Marcomannic Wars are named after Marbod's people, still living in Bohemia, there were about 25 barbarian tribes in all mentioned as taking part for or against Rome. The Empire had been weakened by a plague when its borders were breached in 166 AD, and the emperor Marcus Aurelius then spent much of his remaining years fighting on the Danube, trying and ultimately succeeding in restoring the integrity of the border. Shortly before his death in 180 AD we are led to believe that Rome was on the verge of extending its limits all the way up to the Carpathian Mountains. But Commodus, the emperor's son and successor, was content to confirm the old Roman borders when the barbarians along them had been pacified. Commodus' decision may very well have been a sensible one but, as he turned out to be one of the worst emperors, all his actions have been criticized by subsequent generations and he is often faulted for having missed the opportunity to extend the Empire and provide it

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with more easily defensible boundaries. However, it must be seriously doubted that such a conquest was a real possibility in the face of expansive pressure from the German interior.⁴⁵

The profound changes that were taking place in Denmark, especially on the island of Zealand around 200 AD, can probably be linked with this renewed Germanic expansion. As discussed in the previous section, the Early Roman Iron Age (ca. 1 – 200 AD) saw marked evidence of elitization and, quite possibly, state-formation. Lotte Hedeager has argued that the rise of elites suddenly brought about the transformation to a state-society at the beginning of the Late Roman Iron Age in Denmark (ca. 200 AD). But the evidence she produces can at least equally well be interpreted as indicating a reversal of elitization or renewed democratization. At this time there is an “onset of egalitarianism in burial practice”, gold appears in much fewer graves, weapon graves in general dwindle and their “order of rank” disappears.⁴⁶ Of course, it is quite true that egalitarianism in burial practice does not necessarily indicate an egalitarian society but it is at least consistent with one and it is certainly what we should expect in times of democratization.

However, in spite of the generally undifferentiated graves there is a small number of rich graves dating from the Late Roman Iron Age (200 – 400 AD) with very localized concentration, especially around Stevns, in eastern Zealand.⁴⁷ Hedeager sees this as indicating a rise of centralized state government and this is perhaps not too far from the truth. But if we assume that a simple state or states already existed before 200 AD and that an egalitarian movement swept across Denmark at this time (as in most of Germania), the centralized graves can be explained by some kind of a bonapartist leadership of this movement. As there was no new land to be had and possibilities for expansion extremely limited, the only way the common people could acquire land was if they took it from the elite. This may have happened under the leadership of a single family that used the turmoil to catapult itself to the highest position. Such bonapartist regimes are usually short-lived and either collapse or quickly transform themselves into new elites. The limited opportunities for expansion may have promoted the latter in Denmark, so the second Germanic expansive phase was probably short-lived in this case. However, a bonapartist revolution could have ensured the survival of state-like institutions in these turbulent times.⁴⁸

The wave of democratization sloshing through the Germanic world at this time may have produced a change in the vocabulary used for leaders from *truhtin* to *kuning* (king). The former seems originally to have designated a leader of a war-band, consistent with the foremost

member of a warrior-elite. In Old Norse, the language of the Vikings, it developed into *drottinn* simply meaning lord and is still used as such in Icelandic especially for God as in 'Our Lord'. The latter term, *kuning*, appears to mean something like a (the) 'man of the kindred'. Although 'kindred' is often interpreted here as the 'royal kindred' (or lineage), it seems possible that it originally referred to a wider group like a tribe or sub-tribe of some sort, like the clans of Scotland, which were defined through kinships that were largely fictitious. *Kuning* could thus indicate a leader defined by his relationship with the people rather than with the elite. It is significant that although *kuning* is the usual term for king in almost all surviving Germanic languages, it does not seem to have existed in Gothic at all. In the rest of Germania, it may have emerged in the 2nd century AD to gain universal currency in the 3rd, when the Goths had already left for the Ukraine (below). The almost universal change in terminology is best explained through a real change in leadership.⁴⁹ The new term was used to disassociate the new leaders from the old elite just as the Roman emperor refused to be called king (*rex*) to avoid association with the tyrants of old. As the effects of democratization waned, the new term simply came to mean 'ruler', just as in Rome.

As Marcus Aurelius held the Danube firmly against the Germans, their expansion had either to stop or find another outlet. It is possible that for a while the pressure turned westwards against the Rhenish tribes. But penned up against the equally firmly held Rhine with nowhere else to go, they may have responded by conglomerating into the 'supertribes' of Franks and Alamanni. We first begin hearing of these in the 3rd century, and they may have emerged around 200 AD and succeeded in thwarting the eastern tribes from turning westwards.⁵⁰ As it turned out, new scope for expansion was soon discovered in the Ukraine. Why expansion in this direction was possible is not well known, but much of the area was traditionally dominated by pastoral nomads. As Central European farmers grew strong militarily they were perhaps able to reclaim temporarily some of the region for a more settled way of life.

Around 200 AD, Germanic tribesmen poured into the Ukraine and mixed with the indigenous population. Many of these immigrants came from the Wielbark culture and a Gothic ethnicity was soon established as dominant, even if other Germanic groups were also involved. A new culture emerged fusing together elements from Wielbark, indigenous and other cultures. To what extent the various peoples of the area merged is not known, but the resulting Cernjachov culture, as archaeologists call it, was fairly uniform over a large and growing area. With the opening of the Ukrainian frontier, pressure

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from Germania may have been temporarily relieved. The Wielbark culture started to contract at this time as many of its people headed for the steppe, possibly leaving their royalty behind and reforming into a number of polities in their new homes.⁵¹

The Ukraine was only connected to the rest of the Germanic world through a relatively narrow corridor between the Carpathians and the Pripet marshes, which soon became congested. As the Goths consolidated their political dominion in the Ukraine they would have tried to prevent further movements into their region, at least if the immigrants formed coherent political units and thus constituted a threat. At the same time, the Goths and their allies continued to expand into the steppe and towards the Roman border in Dacia and the Danube delta.

As the Ukrainian outlet was blocked up, expansive pressure once again began to build in Germania and now there was only one way to go – towards the Empire. This time the barbarians were helped by Roman troubles on their eastern border, where a resurrected Persian Empire (from 226 AD) presented a much more formidable opponent than its Parthian predecessor.⁵² Internal discord soon added to Roman difficulties as, from 235 AD, a bewildering succession of usurpers fought their way to the throne, in between fighting Persians and barbarian invaders.

The new conglomerations of larger and stronger Germanic peoples that appeared on the Rhine now brought their power to bear against Rome. The Agri Decumates, the Roman enclave between the upper Rhine and the upper Danube, was permanently evacuated and gradually settled by Alamanni.⁵³ The Roman province of Dacia, in modern Romania, was abandoned as indefensible, and the northern border drawn from now on along the Rhine and the Danube. Everywhere along the European border, barbarian peoples, Goths, Quadi, Alans and others raided and harried. Some Heruls and Goths from the Black Sea even became seaborne marauders attacking Athens and other cities in the Mediterranean, while Saxons and Franks harassed the coasts of Britain and Gaul. This was the time of the 'soldier' emperors, most of whom proved short-lived and were deposed, as they had been raised, by the army when a more promising candidate appeared. However, the soldier-emperors should not be seen as the prime cause of the troubles since many – even most – were at least capable generals, some quite excellent. The frequent change of emperors, many of whom only controlled parts of the empire, should rather be seen as a frantic search for a man capable of dealing with the problem. We should not forget that the first Romans to feel the barbarian threat were the soldiers who risked their lives to defend the

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empire and, when the situation seemed hopeless, cast their eyes about for a saviour to deliver them from evil, in an all too familiar human way.

The remarkable thing is that some of these emperors actually achieved great successes. One of them was Gallienus, who although unpopular and eventually murdered in 268, seems to have initiated a reorganization of the army to make it more capable of dealing with the problems it faced. His successors, Claudius, Aurelianus and Probus, carried on the good work which was consolidated by Diocletian (reigned 284-305 AD), who is awarded the honour of having restored order to the Roman Empire.

The turmoil of the 3rd century seems to have released some of the pressure from the Germans and, as the contracted Roman border was firmly held, Germanic expansion stopped for a while. But something had changed. The initiative had passed from the Romans to the Germans,⁵⁴ and Rome had given up all hope of conquering the barbarians, concentrating instead on defending its borders. The pressure felt by the Germanic tribes from the presence of Rome was thus reduced, and their need to maintain popular armies alleviated. The Germans now seem to have developed towards increased economic diversification and social stratification.⁵⁵ In other words, as the expansion of the 3rd century came to an end we once again find the beginnings of elitization in the Germanic world. However, these developments had not gone far and had certainly not done away with popular armies, when the whole situation blew up once again with the appearance of the Huns in the late 4th century.

The Third Wave

In the late 20th century it became fashionable to underemphasise the collapse of Rome and see it more as a transformation, not exactly peaceful but far less destructive than was previously taken for granted. This transformation was seen primarily as an internal process of the Roman empire, a social and economic reorganization from which there emerged medieval Europe. Whether these changes were seen as decline or transformation, they were traced to developments within Roman society but not to external pressure.

Recently, two important books have been published that view the fall of the Empire in a very different light. Bryan Ward-Perkins criticizes ideas that speak of decline and transformation rather than destruction and fall, and emphasises the fact that the Roman Empire was still vibrant and strong towards the end.⁵⁶ For Ward-Perkins, its

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fall was violent and catastrophic for civilisation and was brought about by defeat and invasions. Although he does not emphasize the negative aspects of Rome's fall, Peter Heather shares Ward-Perkins' view of the late empire as prosperous and sound and concludes that its fall was due to military defeat.⁵⁷ He then goes on to try to explain how and why Rome was defeated. Although I do not share Ward-Perkins' gloomy view of the fall of Rome I find both his and Heather's arguments convincing.⁵⁸ Even if the classical world had lost some of its intellectual vitality since the time of competing polities in Greece and elsewhere, there seems to be very little evidence for a general decline in late Roman times. On the contrary, it now looks as if the population and economy of the Empire peaked in the 4th century AD and was still showing vigorous growth in the 5th century in the Near East, which was spared the depredations of barbarian invasions.⁵⁹ It is true that taxation had increased considerably, primarily to pay for a much larger army, but taxation is not necessarily harmful to a subsistence economy. Peasants do not usually raise their production much beyond what they need to feed themselves and their families or pay their dues if, at the same time, this also increases the drudgery of their work and so lessens the quality of their lives.⁶⁰ Therefore, raising taxes can induce the peasants to increase their production as long as they aren't raised too high. They may not be happy about this, but by working harder will still be able to support their families and pay their taxes and the overall output of the economy will rise.⁶¹ This was the cost of survival but the Empire was able to bear it without succumbing to decline or collapse. The old image of the Empire as a tottering giant that only needed a gentle push to fall over, now seems entirely unjustified.

Romans did their best to defend their empire and cannot be faulted for not doing everything in their power to save it. The barbarian opposition simply became too much for them. If they could have copied the barbarian military system, which ironically resembled their own at the beginning of Rome's rise to power, they would easily have repulsed the attacks with their far greater resources and manpower. But the barbarian military system was closely integrated with their relatively egalitarian social system – one could not exist without the other. To copy the barbarian military system and create a popular army, the Romans would have had to demolish their social stratification, which would have amounted to dismantling their empire, since a large centralized but egalitarian empire seems to have been physically impossible at this time.⁶² In any case, their citizens had become accustomed to a peaceful existence, relying on the army to keep order. The only thing the Romans could do was to defend their

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empire as best they could with their professional army, and in the end this just wasn't enough. Since the Romans had failed to conquer the barbarians, it was only to be expected that sooner or later the barbarians would conquer Rome.⁶³

The barbarians never did close the gap between themselves and the Romans in terms of military equipment. In late Roman times, barbarian craftsmen could produce weapons and armour of at least equal quality, but these were expensive and always limited to a few leaders and elite warriors.⁶⁴ Not only did the Romans have more wealth and better organization to help them equip their troops, they also had to supply arms to only a small fraction of their population, the army. The barbarians, by contrast, had to arm all of their able-bodied males, up to a quarter of the population. However, while professional armies always tend to be better equipped than popular ones, this imbalance was partially offset by the barbarian strategy of avoiding set battles with the Romans, preferring to take advantage of difficult terrain and skirmishing, tactics better suited to their lightly armed infantry.⁶⁵ On the other hand, barbarian cavalry appears to have been about equal to its Roman opponent in terms of equipment and ability. Only the wealthier among the settled barbarians (as opposed to the mounted nomads) could afford to keep warhorses, and they also had better equipment and more time to spend practising. Throughout most of Roman history, the barbarians remained much inferior in fortifications and siegecraft. Their inability to take large walled cities often saved the Romans from the worst of barbarian rampages but by the 5th century this superiority was much reduced, as the Huns at least were now able to conduct successful sieges of Roman cities.⁶⁶ Even if there is little evidence of deterioration of the Roman army, the Romans now enjoyed very little, if any, tactical superiority. The barbarians had finally caught up with them.⁶⁷

By 300 AD the whole of the European border was lined with warlike Germanic tribes, with the occasional steppe nomad group thrown in for good measure. These peoples possessed a military system that had proved capable of defeating the Romans and their spread was bad news for the Empire. At the same time agriculture was becoming more intensive in Germania, grain cultivation was spreading and forests were receding as cemeteries expanded dramatically, all indicating a massive rise in population. Economic diversification soon followed as some of the added population began specializing in producing commodities such as glass, pottery or iron, in order to make a living.⁶⁸ Between 1 AD and 400 AD the total population of the Germanic tribes may have doubled or more, and this went hand in hand with their increased military proficiency. The

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longer this went on, the more trouble was being created for the Romans.

Although the Empire managed to bounce back from the troubles of the 3rd century, it was never the same again. Inflation became rampant, with the debasement of the coinage from the time of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD). While this was a way of deferring some of the increased military costs of the Marcomannic Wars to the future, it would eventually necessitate a rise in pay to the soldiers. Septimius Severus (193-211 AD), who raised soldiers' pay, is often accused of troop pampering and creating a situation in which the soldiers took more and more power into their own hands, but the rise in pay was in reality a necessary reaction to inflation and probably did no more than restore its purchasing power to mid 2nd century levels.⁶⁹ During the 3rd century troubles, raises in taxation could not be avoided and all sorts of social restrictions were introduced to secure the necessary manpower for the army and other state projects, in spite of the state's reduced ability to pay for them. By the late reign of Diocletian it has been claimed that "almost the whole of the administration was now geared to the needs of the army"⁷⁰

In the end there was no stopping the barbarians. When it came, the catalyst for the third wave of Germanic expansion and the final collapse of Rome was provided by a new nomadic people from the eastern steppes, the Huns. They first appeared in the middle of the 4th century AD and shortly afterwards attacked the Goths and pushed them onto the Romans. They then went on to extend their power into Central Europe, where their pressure served to concentrate and synchronize the efforts of the settled barbarians against the Romans. The Romans could, more or less, cope with the barbarian peoples one at a time but when many attacked at once, their defences crumbled.

A prelude to the collapse came in 378 AD, when a branch of the Goths seeking shelter from the Huns within the Empire refused to be treated as a conquered people and soundly beat the Romans in the battle of Adrianople, near Constantinople, killing the emperor Valens. The Romans were forced to come to terms by allowing the Goths a certain autonomy inside the empire, which proved troublesome and eventually disastrous.⁷¹ However, Rome was granted a few decades' respite before the boundaries finally collapsed. In 395 AD the Empire was divided in two, although hardly anyone at the time realized that this division was to become permanent. Initially, it was simply a matter of convenience to have two joint rulers. This had happened several times before and had its roots in Diocletian's reorganization, and was supposed to help the Empire deal with multiple threats at once. However, as the defences deteriorated it ceased to work that

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way. The division put the Western Empire at risk since the East, less vulnerable and with greater resources, was often tempted to ignore its pleas for help.

Between 405 and 408 AD a series of major invasions occurred in rapid succession, and together they permanently destroyed the integrity of the Roman border in Europe. These incursions may have been prompted by further movements of the Huns to the west and probably put hundreds of thousands of people on the move.⁷² The first of the invasions was a massive migration comprised mostly of Goths and led by a king, Radagaisus. They crossed the Alps and invaded Italy, and it took a huge effort by the Roman army under its generalissimo Stilicho to finally defeat the invaders in August 406. Only four months later the Rhine border broke, as new invaders took advantage of Roman preoccupation with Radagaisus.⁷³ A conglomeration of barbarian peoples crossed the river on the last day of 406 and swarmed over Gaul. Burgundians and Huns also invaded during these years, and Roman response was also handicapped by internal division.⁷⁴ The Romans failed to stem the tide in the west but the coup-de-grâce came from the east as the Goths, who had settled in the Balkans after the battle of Adrianople, revolted. These Goths, who became known as Visigoths, then invaded Italy under their leader Alaric and sacked Rome in 410. The Rhine invaders ended up in Spain, from where some of them, the Vandals, later crossed over into North Africa. After devastating Italy, the Visigoths moved into Gaul and later conquered Spain from the earlier invaders.

The Empire's defences broke without major defeat in battle. Roman commanders tended to avoid such dangerous confrontations, a tendency best explained by their difficulties in putting together forces large enough to ensure victory.⁷⁵ This was not the army of the Republic that could be replenished almost indefinitely from the citizenry, and the late Roman Empire could not afford to lose a large part of its military power in a single engagement with enemies already within its borders. The professional imperial army could only be rebuilt through considerable expense and effort, and with enemies all around it seemed safer not to risk annihilation. Unfortunately, this left the barbarian invaders relatively free to roam and the situation had soon deteriorated beyond control. Roman defences had been breached and large and populous provinces effectively wrestled from the imperial government. Even those that remained had been severely devastated. This also meant loss of revenue, which further compounded the problem, since without money the army could not be restored or maintained.⁷⁶ The emergency solution was to hire barbarians as mercenaries or allies – *foederati* – but they also had to

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be paid and the money used to do so was not available for rebuilding the Roman army. As a result, the Empire was caught in a downward spiral.⁷⁷

Under Attila, the Huns for a time became the dominant power in Central Europe and gave a semblance of order and control to the area through a multitude of subject peoples that benefited from participating in Hunnic victories. After bleeding the Eastern Empire dry through devastating campaigns and crippling tributes, they turned their attentions westwards. In 451, they clashed with the Western Romans at the Catalaunian Fields in Gaul, where each side was aided by its own barbarian allies. The outcome was an indecisive Roman victory, but Attila died soon afterwards and the Hunnic Empire collapsed in a general uprising. Having regained their independence, many barbarian tribes again turned their attentions to the crumbling Roman Empire and the situation quickly deteriorated. A great naval expedition in 468 designed to reclaim North Africa from the Vandals, was the last serious effort to save the West, and, as it failed miserably, the Empire was out of funds and out of options. Some provinces tried to defend alone but everywhere in the west the invaders were gaining the upper hand. Britain had been abandoned in the early 5th century and was soon not only under attack from continental barbarians, but also from forces from Ireland and Scotland. In Gaul, Roman rule disintegrated as Visigoths, Franks, Alamanni and Burgundians rose to power, while Spain and North Africa were lost to Vandals, Suebi, Alans and Goths. By 470 only Italy remained of the Western Roman Empire and even it was dominated by an army composed of various Germanic *foederati*, since the regular Roman army had virtually ceased to exist in the West. When it finally came in 476 the end was surprisingly undramatic as Odovacar, the leader of this army, pensioned off the last emperor of the West and pledged allegiance to the Eastern emperor, but in reality assumed rule of Italy as a king.

As the West crumbled, the Eastern Empire survived by the skin of its teeth, helped in no small measure by the fact that its fleet and the massive walls of Constantinople presented a formidable bulwark that prevented the barbarians from crossing over into Asia. No matter how much the Balkans were devastated, the Eastern Roman Empire could always bounce back due to the resources it still commanded in Western Asia and Egypt.⁷⁸ But the West was permanently lost and with it the Roman domination of the Western World. Most of the barbarian kingdoms established on its ruins nominally accepted the Eastern Roman Emperor as their overlord, but this was simply a political fiction convenient to the Romans since it preserved their

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nominal claims, and to the barbarian kings because it lent their rule a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of their Roman subjects.

Under Justinian (527-565) the Eastern Romans made a spirited attempt to reclaim the West, managing to conquer Italy from the Ostrogoths, who had previously won it from Odovacar, North Africa from the Vandals, and even a slice of Spain from the Visigoths, but this is where the reconquest ended.⁷⁹ The Visigoths gradually pushed the Romans out of Spain and the Lombards, new arrivals from Central Europe, won much of Italy after 568. In the seventh century the Eastern Roman Empire shrank still further under the onslaught of Slavs in the Balkans, (chapter 7 below) and particularly the Islamic Arabs from the southeast. From now on it was confined to Asia Minor, parts of the Balkans and some possessions in Italy. It took on an increasingly Greek character and is from this time on called the Byzantine Empire, taking its name from the old Greek settlement of Byzantium where Constantinople, the Eastern Roman capital, had been built. But the Byzantine Empire was no world empire. On the contrary, during the millennium it existed from the fall of the Western Empire it gradually shrank into insignificance, despite periodic recoveries.

In its final centuries, the Roman Empire may not have been the dynamic society of Classical Greece, the Hellenistic world or the Roman Republic. Change and innovation may have slowed down almost to a standstill, a result of the loss of the competitive systems that created classical antiquity, first in Greece and then in the wider Hellenistic world. Roman conquests unified the Mediterranean civilizations and brought peace and prosperity for a time, but in the end a price was paid. Without competition we can expect change to come more slowly, even to the point of stagnation, and this often seems to happen to world empires.⁸⁰ But the positive side of this situation is stability and security, which are certainly not without value, and there is nothing to say that world empires cannot survive indefinitely as long as they are not threatened from without.⁸¹

The Reorganization of the West

As the barbarians conquered the Western Empire, the resulting social and political situation was extremely varied. The conquered territories can be divided in two. In Britain and along the Rhine and upper Danube we see a complete reorganization of society and the adoption of Germanic identity. In all the rest, the barbarian

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conquerors formed a small minority that ruled over the indigenous Roman population.

To some extent this may stem from a difference in organization between the western and eastern tribes, the latter having a longer tradition of concerted political action that allowed them to conquer larger territories and turn themselves into a ruling class of professional warriors.⁸² For some, professionalization had come about prior to conquest through contact with the Empire. As Roman *foederati*, they turned themselves into semi-nomadic, professional warriors with little ties to the land but dependent on payments from the Romans. If these were not forthcoming, they easily turned to plunder and war. This was especially characteristic of the Goths whose conquests can, to some extent, be interpreted as reactions to the Roman inability or unwillingness to continue payments.⁸³ But perhaps the different patterns of conquest can be mainly ascribed to the varying extent to which the different Germanic tribes penetrated the Empire. Along its borders came swarms of farmers, looking primarily for land. However, those who continued further found that they could, with the help of the remaining Roman order, control and draw resources from large territories and their indigenous populations, without necessarily working the land themselves. Such large-scale conquests seem to have been dependent on the survival of some form of Roman organization. The more it survived, the greater areas of territory could be controlled. The Visigoths and the Ostrogoths each probably numbered only about 100,000 people – men, women, young and old – but were still able to acquire and control much of Gaul, as well as all of Spain in one case and all of Italy in the other.⁸⁴ In Britain, the effectiveness of local resistance and perhaps the disappearance of Roman order in the early 5th century made sweeping conquests impossible. However, the defences were not effective enough to prevent the gradual advance of the Anglo-Saxons, completely destroying Romano-British society (chapter 7).

In the Roman interior, the conquerors were too thin on the ground to fundamentally alter the character of the communities they controlled. Instead, they basically became their military arm and upper class, joined by the remnants of the Roman aristocracy. As they took power, the expensive administration and tax collection capacity of the Roman Empire were reduced, and although trade and cities did generally suffer in these times of war and collapse, the lot of the common farmer probably improved considerably. The kingdoms established by the barbarians on Roman soil were simpler organizations than the Roman Empire and cheaper to maintain, and could therefore do away with much of Roman taxation. At the same

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time, this reduction was also due to the relative inexperience of the barbarians in fiscal matters, their inherent dislike of taxes, and their need, as a minority, for popular acquiescence if not support.⁸⁵ Writing in 5th century Gaul, the pious Salvian tells us of the crushing tax burden of the poor in the Roman realm; people who had no share in the benefits distributed by the government. His conclusion was this:

For in the Gothic country the barbarians are so far from tolerating this sort of oppression that not even Romans who live among them have to bear it. Hence all the Romans in that region have but one desire, that they may never have to return to the Roman jurisdiction. It is the unanimous prayer of the Roman people in that district that they may be permitted to continue to lead their present life among the barbarians.⁸⁶

The barbarian conquerors reserved for themselves the role of war and protection, not as a re-established professional army but as a warrior elite, deriving their income from the land rather than from the state's treasury. In this way, states that were increasingly feudal in character were established on the ruins of the centralized Roman Empire.

It is worth noting that barbarian farmers tend to be much more destructive as conquerors than the mounted nomads from the steppes. The latter often possessed a military superiority and mobility that allowed them to subjugate large tracts of civilized lands, and even if the initial conquest spread death and destruction, they did not normally covet the agricultural lands of the peasants, although occasionally they simply drove them out and turned their lands into pasture. Instead, when the conquest was complete, they were faced with the problem of controlling their new empire and deriving income from it, and for this they had no alternative but to rely on the old administrative system to a greater or lesser extent, allowing it to collect taxes, tolls and rents. After a while, the descendants of the nomadic tribesmen were ruling civilized empires and it seemed like nothing had changed. This happened, for example, in China after the Mongol and Manchurian conquests, and the large-scale conquests of the Roman interior by nomadized Germans generally followed this pattern.

On the other hand, barbarian farmers in expansion had a tendency to fundamentally reorganize society in the territories that they conquered and settled, destroying old elites and establishing relatively democratic and egalitarian communities in place of coercive empires. They had no use for the old elite or its administration, which came crumbling down along with it much of its 'higher' civilization.

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All they wanted was some land to settle and to be free of lords and ladies, taxes and rents, and they often seem to have taken over the lands of Roman villas for this purpose.⁸⁷ The full force of this kind of Germanic conquest, which amounted to a social revolution, was only felt in the northwest of the Roman Empire; in Britain and parts of Gaul and Central Europe. In these areas, Roman civilization and social organization suffered almost complete eradication.

The rest of the Western Empire never experienced the total reorganization of society that usually accompanies an expansion cycle. The common people of these lands, although benefiting to some extent from the change, were never incorporated into the Germanic expansion cycle with its militarization and democratization, but basically continued their existence as the lower classes under an elitist regime. The only thing that changed was the form of elite rule, from a centralized state to the warrior elite of the emerging feudal kingdoms of medieval Europe.

But even those parts of Central and Western Europe that, by the end of the Migration Period, were settled by Germanic warrior-farmers, also felt the growing force of elitization. In Gaul, the Franks had established a substantial kingdom in the late 5th century, probably influenced by the civilization that they had conquered and the need to gain a better control over lands not immediately settled by their own people. This instigated the development of the Frankish state that became increasingly elitist.⁸⁸ The Gallo-Roman aristocracy merged with and adopted the ethnic identity of the Frankish ruling class and together they probably sought to protect the indigenous social order from land-hungry tribesmen, since it provided them with an income, resources and social position incompatible with an egalitarian order. The public acceptance of Catholic Christianity by King Clovis ca. 500 AD, rather than the Arian version usually favoured by the Germans, may be interpreted as a change of allegiance by the ruling elite from Frankish free farmers to Gallo-Roman aristocrats.⁸⁹ In this way, the political success of the Franks seems eventually to have caused the elimination of new opportunities for expansion for the common warrior-farmer. This had widespread effects, since their kingdom became the dominant one in Western Europe, gradually incorporating all the Western Germanic tribes on the continent. Only the tribes that had invaded Britain were still expanding, but these also eventually stopped when they ran out of space and into the fierce opposition of the extreme west (chapter 7).

As all expansion cycles must end when opportunities disappear, the Germanic expansion gradually came to a halt. When this happened, the free warrior-farmers saw little point in continued

bellicosity and the popular army slowly degenerated to be replaced by elite warfare.⁹⁰ Their egalitarianism and democratic traditions survived for a time but eventually succumbed to the elitization that reached its peak in the 11th and 12th centuries (chapter 8). In this way, the difference between the Germanic and Roman social systems largely disappeared as both developed towards the deeply stratified societies of the High Middle Ages, organized in feudal states and characterized by a 'chivalrous' warrior elite.

This was a different world from the Roman one. The single Western experiment with a world empire had finally failed. After the Islamic Arabs conquered half of the Mediterranean basin in the 7th and 8th centuries, permanently splitting it in two in terms of religion, culture and identity, it became increasingly unlikely that its sea-routes would facilitate the formation of a new world empire, as they had done for the Romans. There were some tendencies towards unification in the Islamic zone, the last one coming under the Ottoman Turks in the early modern period, but Christian Europe had by then developed such antagonism towards Islam that the idea of living under Muslim rule had become totally abhorrent. Far from generating a world empire, the Mediterranean for centuries became a battleground of two very different ways of thinking and living which drifted even further apart. North of the Mediterranean, however, a pattern of political fragmentation was re-established and competitive systems were to emerge there once again, reverting to the old European tradition after the Roman experiment.

¹ Johansen et al. (2004) have argued for the formation of a socio-political network in the Early Bronze Age (1800-1100 BC) which may have survived into Late Bronze Age society which, however, they see as more stratified and 'chiefly'. The Nordic Bronze Age may have constituted a *cooperative* system rather than a competitive one, see note 39, chapter 1.

² E.g. Kristiansen (1998), pp. 305-307.

³ Unless one likes to believe in a prestige goods model for socio-political hierarchy. In this case one could argue (as Kristiansen does) that the cessation of bronze imports from the south was instrumental in changing northern society. For a discussion on prestige goods see pp. 88-91, above.

⁴ Jensen (1994), pp. 121-122. See also Collis (2003), pp. 183-185.

⁵ Jensen (1994), pp. 121-124. Kristiansen (1998), p. 305.

⁶ The Jastorf culture is often equated with the emergence and original distribution of Proto-Germanic, i.e. that all Germanic languages originated within it. This is hard to except since it would make it hard to account for Germanic being spoken in S-Sweden and S-Norway and early connections with Finnic also seem to contradict the notion. Therefore, the Jastorf culture probably only included some Proto-Germanic speakers but not all of them. See Kallio (2004), p. 236.

⁷ Randsborg (1995). See also Randsborg (2004).

⁸ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 37, 11. Cf. Cunliffe (2001), p. 144. The latter are in fact called Guiones but this is usually assumed to be an error for Gutones. The actual geographic description is too vague and problematic to be of much help. The name 'Teutones' is, of course, the same as that of the later migrating tribe and derives from a common Germanic stem meaning tribe or people. It is preserved today in *Deutsch* the name that the modern Germans have for themselves. It is an intriguing possibility that *Teutones* or some similar word was used as a general term for a large group of southwestern Germans in the Early Iron Age (ca. 500 BC – 1 AD) and later resurfaced as these peoples merged into a single nationality. Many of the tribes to the northeast, especially those close to the border zone, had names like Gutones, Goths or Gautar, the stem of which originally seems to indicate 'to pour'. In Scandinavia it also developed the meaning 'to give birth', (especially of animals in Old Norse and its Scandinavian descendants – Ásgeir Blöndal Magnusson (1989), "gjóta", p. 250). These names may thus indicate the native population, those 'born and bred' in the land, as opposed to the newcomers and their allies. The antagonism and interaction between these groups may be reflected in the Scandinavian myth that tells of a war in Heaven between two groups of gods the Aesir and the Vanir who finally made peace and merged into a single pantheon. The Vanir were especially revered in Sweden whereas stories were told of Odin and his Aesir coming to Scandinavia from the south.

⁹ Cf. Hedeager (1992), pp. 151-152, 253-254.

¹⁰ However, it may be suggested that a term similar to the Latinized form *Suebi* came close to being a common designation at some point. It seems to mean simply 'us' or 'our people', a fitting term for a cultural and linguistic group, and the Romans applied it to a large group of Germanic tribes in central Germania that was pushing to the south and southwest. Perhaps this group escaped the polarization between the Teutones and Gutones and so preserved the original name. The Swedes or Suiones, of Scandinavia, had a name which was formed in a similar way and seems to mean the same. Also they may have escaped the formation of new identities in the conflict zone. See also note 19.

¹¹ Todd (1987), pp. 7, 63-64. Todd (2004), p. 23. Tacitus says the Bastarnae are "like Germans in their language" (*Germania*, 46).

¹² Jordanes IV, 25. Heather (1998, pp. 9-30) argues against the validity of these stories and suggests that if there was a Scandinavian immigration to the historically attested home of the Goths on the south shore of the Baltic it was a small one. There is no consensus on the matter.

¹³ Paul the Deacon I, 1. See also Wolfram (1997), pp. 28-34.

¹⁴ Tacitus (*Germania*, 46) tells of the Venedi, eastern neighbours of the Germans, whom he doesn't know whether to classify as Germans or Sarmatians (a nomadic steppe people) but finds them closer to the Germans. These Venedi are still sometimes assumed to have been Slavs and the Slavic population of Poland in the Early Middle Ages was demonstrably called Wends by their Germanic neighbours. But this name was probably

transferred from an earlier population in the same area, and the Slavs themselves certainly did not use it. Many scholars now accept the existence of an early Indo-European group in Poland of this name that has since been lost. Some have also speculated about possible ties with the Veneti of the Adriatic, from whom the city of Venice derives its name. For a summary on current ideas about the Venedi see Wikipedia contributors, "Vistula Veneti," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vistula_Veneti&oldid=166372203 (accessed October 25, 2007).

¹⁵ See note 19 for a discussion of a Germanic ethnonym.

¹⁶ The Suebi can probably be roughly equated with the *Elbe-German* archaeological group, for which see Todd (1987), pp. 40, 48-63.

¹⁷ Collis (1997), pp. 173-174.

¹⁸ See also Heather (2005), pp. 54-55.

¹⁹ It is problematic whether these peoples ever called themselves Germans except at a late date and under Roman influence. The term *Suebi*, which may have been the original term for Germans (see note 10), was applied by Caesar to all the Germans he encountered except those established on the Rhine. The Rhenish tribes may in fact have been a mix of Germanic immigrants and an earlier indigenous population. Some of them may even still have spoken a non-Germanic language in Caesar's time. It is quite possible that the term *Germans* was originally applied to a group of peoples that were not Germanic in the modern sense but an earlier population, perhaps Celtic in a broad sense, that lived along the Rhine. These may have included the Treveri who claimed German descent although they spoke a Celtic language (Tacitus, *Germania*, 28). It suited Caesar's political purpose to draw a strict line along the river and he therefore classified all the peoples living east of it as Germans and those to the west as Gauls. This terminology then became fixed in the minds of all later Roman authors. The fact that the Belgic tribes of northern Gaul (certainly Celtic) also claimed Germanic descent (Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* II, 4) may thus indicate an affinity with these Rhenish Celts (the original 'Germans') rather than the Germans in the modern sense. The possible lack of a common German ethnic name may reflect a profound political division and antagonism introduced at the beginning of the Iron Age. However, this lack of a common ethnic name is only possible but not certain, as our sources for Germanic political thought and identities are extremely meagre. The absence of evidence is not evidence for absence. Even if it were true that the Germans lacked an ethnonym, it does not mean that they did not have a common identity (as Todd, 2004, p. 8, assumes). The same can be said of Viking Age Scandinavians who did not have a common ethnonym but expressed their common identity through the geographical and linguistic terms *Norðrlönd* (The North Lands) and *Dönsk Tunga* (the Danish Tongue). There is absolutely no doubt about a common Northern identity during the Viking Age and afterwards (chapter 7) – it even survives today. The preference of most Germanic tribes of accepting Arian Christianity rather than the Catholic version can probably be interpreted as an expression of Germanic or barbarian identity. See Mitchell (2007, p. 289)

and Heather (1998, pp. 313-317) for Arianism as an expression of Gothic identity. One may also point to how artistic styles and products are spread throughout Germania. For example the distribution of finds of Cernjachov glassware corresponds exactly to the distribution of Germanic languages (see Heather, 1998, pp. 78-79). See also: Wells (1999), pp. 107-114; Wells (2001), pp. 114-118.

²⁰ Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* VI, 21, 23.

²¹ Tacitus, *Germania*, 6.

²² Tacitus, *Germania*, 6. *The King's Mirror*, 37 (p. 214). This was called a 'pig formation' (at *svínfylkja*) and is also mentioned for example by Saxo Grammaticus in his Danish History (*Gesta Danorum* VII, 10). Generally speaking, wedge-shaped or triangular formations were quite common in medieval Europe. See Contamine (1986), pp. 231-232.

²³ Tacitus, *Annales* II, 88.

²⁴ Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* VI, 22. Perhaps Caesar was also thinking of Roman politics and the acute question of land distribution (chapter 5 above).

²⁵ Tacitus, *Germania*, 11-13.

²⁶ Mostly based on Tacitus' *Germania*.

²⁷ Thrane (1994), p. 102. Jensen (1994), p. 118.

²⁸ Jensen (1994, pp. 120-121) speaks of "the rise of a new warrior élite" and that the rich graves "indicate the rise of a new aristocracy which used Celtic and Mediterranean imports as symbols of power and prestige." See also Hedeager (1992), p. 79.

²⁹ Todd (1977), p. 39. Inhumations are usually explained through Roman or steppe influence. This is not incompatible with them being used by the elite to set themselves apart.

³⁰ Todd (1977), p. 40. See also Hedeager (1992), pp. 157-158; Todd (2004), pp. 33-34, 87-102.

³¹ Jensen (1982), pp. 238-242. As usual he interprets this distribution in terms of a prestige-goods economy (above pp. 88-91).

³² Moltke (1985), p. 64.

³³ Hedeager (1992, pp. 152-177 and *passim*) argues for state-formation in Denmark in the Late Roman Iron Age (below, section 3). Thurston (2001, p. 144) speaks of an Iron Age "hierarchy that fluctuates between a chiefly and a state-level structure." At least some scholars are willing to consider such possibilities.

³⁴ Wells (1999), pp. 246-252.

³⁵ Tacitus, *Germania*, 44. On the far side of the Suiones he mentions the Sitones who he claims are like the Suiones except that they are ruled by women (45). This is probably rather fanciful and if the Sitones ever existed they might have been some Finnic tribe rather than Germans.

³⁶ The 6th century Ostrogoth Jordanes (III, 23) tells us that the Danes were of the same stock as the *Suetidi*, a term that apparently refers to Swedes of some sort – perhaps a more general term than *Suehans*, which he also uses. The reason Tacitus used the name Suiones for this group may be that it was an old generic name for a large group of Germanic peoples of a similar origin

to the name of the Suebi (note 10), or even ultimately of the same origin, although later superseded by more recent tribal names except in the Svealand in central Sweden. This original wide 'Swedish' identity may seem to conflict with the hypothesis of an early Gotonic identity in much of this area (see note 8). Tribal identities, however, were quite fluid. One may mention the Rugians who had their own kingdom in Central Europe, but after it was destroyed by Odovacar some of them merged with the Ostrogoths where they became the sub-tribe of the Rogii – Rugians and Ostrogoths at the same time (see Heather, 1998, p. 175). We can envisage that before Tacitus' time, the people of the Danish Isles considered themselves Gotonic (along with the people of southern Sweden and the continental Goths). A somewhat conflicting identity would have been the 'Swedish' meaning Scandinavian, more or less, but not including the continental Goths. The 'Gotonic' identity may have been losing importance by this time but perhaps it was preserved in the toponym *Eygotaland* used in the medieval sagas as collective term for the Danish Isles. It means 'Land of the Island Goths'. Needless to say, all of this is strictly hypothetical.

³⁷ Tacitus, *Germania*, 44.

³⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* II, 46, 62-63. It was a Goth called Catualda who deposed Marbod but with native support. Also Catualda ended up seeking refuge with the Romans. Marbod spent 18 years growing old in Italy, "his reputation dimmed by excessive fondness for life," as Tacitus delicately puts it.

³⁹ Cf. Kristiansen (1998), p. 356. Although there were also some Germanic chiefs that sided with the Romans in their war with Arminius, presumably because they thought Roman rule would strengthen their social position (Heather, 2005, p. 55).

⁴⁰ Tacitus only mentions a strong monarchical government among the remote tribes of the Suiones and the Gotones and clearly indicates that this is not the norm among the Germans (*Germania*, 44). For the archaeological evidence see e.g. Cunliffe (1994), pp. 440-443; Todd (1977).

⁴¹ Todd (1977), p. 41. For a useful overview of the archaeological evidence, see Todd (2004), pp. 62-83.

⁴² Cunliffe (1994), p. 443.

⁴³ Tacitus, *Germania*, 44.

⁴⁴ Heather (1998), pp. 21-25, 35-38. For the Przeworsk culture, see e.g. Todd (1987), pp. 70-74.

⁴⁵ Todd (2004), pp. 54-55. Wells (1999), pp. 189-191.

⁴⁶ Hedeager (1992), pp. 148, 135 and in general 104-170. Her own interpretation of the evidence depends on assuming a prestige goods system in the Early Roman Iron Age facilitating the transformation to state society in the Late Roman Iron Age (pp. 170-177). In view of the problematic nature of prestige goods models (above pp. 88-91), such an interpretation has to be considered uncertain at best. For the changes in Denmark in these times, see also Todd (2004, pp. 106-107) who mentions the extremely rich deposits of bog sacrifices from the late second to the later third century. These sacrifices appear to have been made on behalf of whole communities and can therefore be interpreted as a wholesale renunciation of exceptional wealth in

egalitarian societies. Disposing of signs of elitism and privilege may have been considered preferable to having people fight among themselves over the spoils.

⁴⁷ Hedeager (1992), pp. 46, 49, 51, 69-70, 146-148. See also Wells (1999), pp. 252. See also Kaul (1997) for an interesting attempt to reconstruct the political situation in Denmark around 200 AD.

⁴⁸ The mystery of the Heruls may be relevant here. In the early 3rd century AD a new Germanic tribe appeared by the Black Sea and soon began raiding its coasts. These were called Heruli by the Romans and also appeared as raiders around the North Sea, indicating that some of them were still at large in the North. The tradition was later recorded that they had been expelled by the Danes from their homes (Jordanes, III, 23). It is not clear when this happened or whether the homes in question were the homes of the Danes or homes of the Heruls, but perhaps they were both. In many pre-Viking runic inscriptions the rune-master designated himself as an *Erilar*. The etymology is not certain but it has often been suggested that this is not only cognate with the tribal name of the Heruli but also with the term *jarl* used in the Viking Age and later for a high official, a royal substitute. The term may originally have referred not to an ethnicity but rather to a social group – the nobility in general and as such it seems to have survived in Anglo-Saxon *eorl*. This later developed into a specific noble title, the familiar *earl*, probably under influence of the Scandinavian *jarl*. Perhaps the expulsion of the Heruls from Denmark came as some kind of a revolution when the general population had had enough of the ‘Herulian’ rune-using ‘state’ and its ruling class and drove them off along with their friends, families and followers. The indigenous population then developed a new *Danish* identity but the Heruls or Erilar became known as rune-masters and disseminated the knowledge of runes, and their name was thus later applied to royal officials who had much use for such skills. See Jones (1973), pp. 26-29.

⁴⁹ For a thorough discussion on Germanic terms for kingship, see Green (1998), pp. 121-140. A full millennium after this transformation, the Icelander Snorri Sturluson tells us that in the remote past the term *konungr* replaced the older term *drottinn* when the dynasty of Danr and his kinsmen assumed power. Furthermore, he also tells us that inhumations in burial-mounds replaced the older cremation burials at the same time (Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, “Prologus” [Snorri’s preface] and “Ynglinga saga”, 17). If applied to the proposed bonapartist revolution in Denmark around 200 AD, when it seems likely that a Danish identity emerged under a new leadership at the same time as inhumations were spreading, Snorri’s information fits uncannily well. However, it would be foolhardy to claim that he actually possessed accurate information about these events a thousand years after they occurred and with no known written records.

⁵⁰ The third in this group, the Saxons, are first mentioned around 150 AD (Ptolemy, *Geographia* II, 10 – See Todd (2004), pp. 202-210 for the early Saxons). Whether they were already a ‘supertribe’ at this point is uncertain. They may have been a smaller but expanding tribe or even constituted a part of the hypothetical westward pressure. The Alamanni are first mentioned in

213 (Cassius Dio 78, 13; cf. Hummer, 1998, p. 6) and the Franks around 260 (James, 1991, p. 35).

⁵¹ Heather (1998), pp. 43-50. Heather (2005), pp. 51-63. Stories of a huge 'Ostrogothic Empire' under king Ermaneric in the mid 4th century seem to be exaggerations, see Heather (1998), pp. 52-57.

⁵² Heather (2005, pp. 58-67 and *passim*) strongly emphasises the importance of the Persian threat.

⁵³ Todd (2004), pp. 193-196.

⁵⁴ According to Campbell (2002, p. 71) it was around 300 AD "that Roman superiority in battle began to disappear".

⁵⁵ Heather (1998), pp. 63-84. Heather (2005), pp. 86-94. Calling these developments the 'Germanic Revolution' as Heather does (1998, p. 63) is probably a considerable exaggeration. Much of the evidence for this is difficult to interpret and late, dating from after the barbarians settled on Roman ground. Heather acknowledges that this may have transformed social organization and does not necessarily reflect earlier practice (1998, p. 90). Even so, Heather concedes that the "politically significant class" among the Ostrogoths in their 6th century state in Italy "amounted to at least one-fifth (and perhaps rather more) of a total male population of 25,000-30,000" (1998, p. 73, see also Heather, 2005, pp. 94-96). Even if this is not an underestimation, it is still similar to the hoplite class in ancient Greece and reflects a *relatively* egalitarian society. It is absolutely not a typical elite-dominated society in which the politically significant class usually constitutes about 2% of the population or less (it makes little difference whether this is calculated as a proportion of males only or whether families are included).

⁵⁶ Ward-Perkins (2005).

⁵⁷ Heather (2005).

⁵⁸ Ward-Perkins makes the mistake of equating a dramatic fall in the volume of trade, manufactured goods and high culture with a "dramatic fall in living standards" (2005, p. 123). For the common people, access to land, terms of tenure, taxes and dues were far more important in determining their quality of life. The apparent poverty of post Roman times is probably best explained by the reduction in taxes and rents, allowing the farmers to produce less than before, therefore reducing society's total wealth. This would leave less surplus for the upper classes and specialists, which in turn greatly reduced trade. In short, the 'poverty' just signifies less stratification.

⁵⁹ Mitchell (2007), pp. 330-338. Heather (2005), pp. 112-113.

⁶⁰ For peasant economics see Chayanov (1986).

⁶¹ Heather (2005), pp. 110-115. Even if Heather has previously taken a Malthusian outlook on agricultural production and population (p. 87), in this case he adopts a more reasonable Boserupian stand seeing production not mechanically determined by technology but rather by the effort put into it.

⁶² And yet, there was a certain tendency to arm the populace towards the end but it was too little and too late (Ward-Perkins, 2005, p. 48-49). One might speculate that a bonapartist revolution could have saved the Romans by soliciting the aid of the commoners by distributing among them the lands of the elite. But gathering support for such a rule throughout the vast Empire

would have been all but impossible. For the Roman elite, barbarian rule was certainly preferable to a bonapartist revolution at their expense as they were generally able to reach some accommodation with the conquerors and usually combined with them to form a new ruling class.

⁶³ Heather (2005, pp. 456-59) reaches a similar conclusion, although by a somewhat different route, as he emphasises the effect Roman pressure had on improving German organization and even increasing social stratification. In my view, increased social stratification would, through elitization, have been more pronounced without Roman pressure and in the long run have *lessened* the barbarian threat.

⁶⁴ Barbarian iron-working, although smaller in scale, was not technologically inferior to Roman. In some ways it may even have been superior. See Godfrey & Nie (2004). For a general discussion of barbarian military equipment, see Elton (1996), pp. 60-72; Todd (2004), pp. 35-43. For Germanic metallurgy in general, see Todd (2004), pp. 127-129.

⁶⁵ For a general discussion of barbarian military practices see Elton (1996), pp. 45-88.

⁶⁶ Heather (2005), pp. 302-303. See also Elton (1996), pp. 82-86.

⁶⁷ Some scholars have tried to explain the fall of the Empire through a decline in discipline and general effectiveness of the Roman army (e.g. Ferrill, 1986). However, such decline is unverified and highly unlikely. For a balanced view of the late Roman army see Southern and Dixon (2000).

⁶⁸ Heather (1998), pp. 75-84. Heather (2005), pp. 86-87. Heather, wrongly in my view, interprets this evidence as an agricultural revolution 'allowing' population growth. This is a Malthusian interpretation and a more sensible Boserupian one would be that population growth came first and demanded changes in agricultural practices. This population growth is, of course, explained by the continuing Germanic expansion cycle. Heather also interprets the increased economic diversification as "founded upon an increase in social stratification" (1998, p. 84). This, however, is somewhat superfluous as population growth by itself is perfectly capable of stimulating economic diversification. The relationship between population densities and economic specialization is fairly straightforward.

⁶⁹ Southern and Dixon (2000), pp. 6-7. See also Campbell (2002, pp. 84-86), who thinks that the pay rise "probably outstripped inflation" although he does not cite any evidence for this. It seems clear that the Late Empire had great difficulties in meeting the costs of defence and that this was not just due to the avarice of soldiers. See Southern and Dixon (2000), pp. 76-79.

⁷⁰ Southern and Dixon (2000), p. 23.

⁷¹ Southern and Dixon (2000), pp. 46-47, 50-51. Heather (1998), pp. 130-146. Burns (1994), pp. 1-42. Wolfram (1997), pp. 79-89.

⁷² Hummer (1998, pp. 12-16) argues that the Rhine invaders of 406 (Suebi, Vandals and Alans) were fugitives from Hunnic inroads into the Carpathian Basin.

⁷³ Rhine troops had probably been withdrawn to Italy to deal with him. Ward-Perkins (2005), p. 39.

⁷⁴ Heather (2005), pp. 193-211. Burns (1994), pp. 205-214.

⁷⁵ Ward-Perkins (2005), p. 40.

⁷⁶ Heather (2005), pp. 296-98. Ward-Perkins (2005), pp. 42-43. Elton (1996, pp. 118-127), even if he clearly shows the financial difficulties of the Late Empire, does not think they were a crucial factor in the fall of Rome.

⁷⁷ For *foederati* and the decline of the regular army see Southern and Dixon (2000), pp. 48-50, 52-55, 71-72; Elton (1996), pp. 91-94.

⁷⁸ Ward-Perkins (2005), pp. 58-62.

⁷⁹ For Ostrogothic history, see especially Burns (1991).

⁸⁰ Wesson (1967), pp. 203-241 and *passim*.

⁸¹ Of course, system collapse theorists would disagree, see pp. 43-44.

⁸² It is traditional in studies of the Germanic tribes to make a distinction between republican West Germans and monarchical East Germans (e.g. Wolfram, 1997, pp. 15-20). If correct, it would then trace back to the time when elitization and even state-building emerged in the interior but not on the Roman border (see section 2).

⁸³ Heather (1998), pp. 130-165.

⁸⁴ Heather (1998), p. 176.

⁸⁵ See James (1991), pp. 191-194.

⁸⁶ Salvian, *De gubernatione* VII, 8.

⁸⁷ Todd (1994), p. 467.

⁸⁸ For early Frankish involvement in Gaul, see Todd (2004), pp. 179-193; Green (1998), p. 88, and especially James (1991), pp. 35-77. It must be noted that a considerable number of Franks had settled in Gaul before the collapse of the Roman border. Apparently these were largely *laeti*, barbarian settlers that had been granted land in return for military service. See James (1991), pp. 38-57; Todd (2004), pp. 180-181, 188. For social and legal divisions, see James (1991), pp. 216-220.

⁸⁹ Arianism did exist among the Franks, so there was a very real possibility of Frankish conversion to this version of Christianity preferred by most Germanic tribes. See James (1991), pp. 121-123. An important aspect of the conquest of Gaul is the fact that the more Romanized *Salian* Franks took the lead rather than the *Rhineland* Franks. Their leaders had a strong tendency to identify with the Gallo-Romans or at least the Gallo-Roman elite. James (1991), pp. 83-84, 88-91, 108. The tendency of the Roman aristocracy to merge with or become indistinguishable from the ruling barbarians was not confined to the Frankish kingdom, see James (1997).

⁹⁰ It seems that, at least from the late Merovingian period (7th century), most armies of the early medieval West were small and elite-based. Conscription was only used intermittently and only for local defence. Reuter (1997).

7. BETWEEN ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES.

As the Germanic peoples rushed to invade the Roman Empire, their old competitive system disintegrated. A somewhat chaotic period followed without any large-scale political structure, either an empire or a cohesive competitive system. During this period, about 400 – 1000 AD, some competitive systems did exist. These were all on a relatively small scale compared to the later European system, all of barbarian or semi-barbarian origin, although developments towards statehood was seen in most, and they all seem to have gone through an expansion cycle, albeit of different intensities. However, one of the expansion cycles of the era, the Slavic one, seems to have been different in that it did not originate in a competitive system. Another, that of the Vikings, spawned a new system in Iceland that survived in relative isolation into the 13th century. Iceland is discussed in this chapter rather than the next one because, as a barbarian (i.e. stateless) system, it showed great affinity to other such systems and had little to do with what was happening on the European continent.

Ireland

The first of these competitive systems was the Irish one, and suspicions of its existence are raised by the remarkable achievements of the Irish during the early medieval period. While the rest of Europe was experiencing a period of intellectual slumber, Irish literature was flourishing, with burgeoning monasticism and Christian missionary activity in the British Isles and mainland Europe. Irish scholars were sought after during the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries, and it has even been claimed in a popular book that the Irish somehow ‘saved civilization’.¹ This is the sort of dynamism we would expect from a competitive system.

It turns out that Ireland was indeed politically divided and in a state of constant internal conflict from the earliest times. Statehood appears absent, at least until the 11th century, which places the Irish of the Early Middle Ages, along with the somewhat later Icelanders, in the rare category of *literate barbarians*.² Very little is known about Irish history prior to the conversion to Christianity that began in the 5th century and as Irish literature didn’t really blossom until the 7th century, all records of previous events are subject to doubts and

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scrutiny. Archaeology indicates a preponderance of a few prominent centres in the Iron Age but doesn't help much otherwise since finds from this period, especially of settlements, are quite rare.³ However, excavation of what appears to be an Ulster defensive system, The Dorsey earthworks, dating to about 100 BC, and possibly others, reveals not only internal division and conflict but also a remarkable ability to concentrate effort in common undertakings.⁴

The system of five Irish provinces, well known from later sources, may already have been in place at this early date. In historical times, the provinces were hardly cohesive political units but rather ideals from which the real political situation differed substantially. In the 8th century there were about eight main units and these were subject to splitting and realignment through the varying fortunes of the royal lineages.⁵ These units were divided into a number of tribes (*túath*) of which there were about 150 in all with a probable mean population of around 5,000 and each having its own king (*rí*).⁶ However, the provinces may well be relics of an older system with larger and more centralized polities. Archaeology, aided by historical tradition, has revealed some formidable central places from the Iron Age that can be interpreted as political centres, possibly of the provinces. These include Navan Fort (Ulster), Tara (Meath), Dún Ailinne (Leinster) and Cruachain (Connacht).⁷ Warfare was always rampant and political competition well developed, but in spite of internal divisions the Irish still shared a culture, language, identity and a similar social structure. As Ireland emerges from prehistory it already seems to fit perfectly the qualifications for a competitive system.

The early and relatively eager adoption of Christianity in Ireland was probably, in no small measure, facilitated by the competitive system. As in the later examples of the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings, Christianity became a survival trait. An organized religion possessing the tools of literacy brought greater cohesion to the political units, allowing them to compete more effectively. The decentralized form of Christianity adopted in Ireland may have served as a powerful agent to increase cooperation and forge identity within the political units. We know for a fact that the small Irish polities competed through patronizing religious houses and creating their own saints and the Christian religion thus seems to have become the pathway of competition between them – all the better to smooth the conversion to Christianity and the development of literary activity. However, not all early Irish literature was religious. Much of it was of a secular nature, including a fair share of annals and sagas which may have served to strengthen the small polities by giving them a history and legends

that people could relate to, much as the Icelandic sagas did some centuries later (below).

There are some indications of early Irish development towards states. The *ogham* script is one, since writing has a general tendency to coincide with statehood. These inscriptions were mostly on stone and commemorated deceased individuals. Dating roughly from the 4th to the 6th centuries, few of them show any indication of Christian influence.⁸ Since ogham script was probably not invented to be used solely for commemorative inscription, it must predate the earliest inscriptions and may indicate a developing administrative system in the first centuries AD in some or all of the political units.

But there are also indications of an expansion cycle. Irish society as we know it from the 7th and 8th centuries was relatively egalitarian, which often indicates an earlier expansion cycle, but there is also direct evidence of an expansion.⁹ In 367 AD, Roman sources mention Scotti and Attacotti as being among the raiders harassing Roman Britain. Both of them probably came from Ireland.¹⁰ In the 5th century the Scotti extended their sway, apparently with some considerable migrations, from northeast Ireland to southwest Scotland, establishing there the kingdom of Dal Riada which later was instrumental in the creation of the kingdom of Scotland to which these Irish immigrants eventually gave their name. This was the migration that brought the Gaelic language to Scotland.¹¹ At the same time, or even earlier, there was a corresponding movement of Irish to Wales, although they left less of a permanent mark there.¹² Ogham inscriptions also document these movements as they are mostly confined to Ireland and the Irish settlements in Scotland and Wales.

Although we do not know exactly what was going on in Ireland in these crucial centuries, we may perhaps hypothesize that the five provinces of early times signified a half-forgotten system, perhaps emerging as early as the 2nd century BC or even earlier. These political units developed towards statehood with ogham writing and administrative systems. In the early centuries AD the competition led them into an expansion cycle with militarization, democratization and eventually expansion, perhaps beginning already in the 3rd century AD, exactly along the lines of the earlier Greek, Gallic and other expansions. It is worth mentioning that preserved Irish swords from the Iron Age are characteristically short, only 37-46 cm in length.¹³ Short swords often indicate the use of massed infantry where longer swords would have been cumbersome, and infantry of this kind is the most common form that mass warfare has taken in Europe. Consequently, this is the sort of warfare we should expect in Ireland during the expansion and in the period leading up to it.

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Pollen analyses from Irish bogs indicate a dramatic expansion of agriculture in the 3rd century AD, which can hardly mean anything but rapid population growth – exactly what we would expect at the start of an expansion cycle.¹⁴ The expansion could easily have thrown the competitive system into chaos and hindered the state-building processes, as also seems to have happened among the Germanic peoples on the continent.¹⁵ From the expansion there emerged another competitive system, perhaps more complex and divided than before and apparently less well organized but still capable of remarkable cultural achievements.

However dynamic and creative the Irish of the ‘Golden Age’ (ca. 550-850 AD) were, their political disorganization proved their undoing when they first clashed with another competitive system in expansion, the Vikings, and later with the well-organized kingdom of England which eventually brought all of Ireland under its control.

The Anglo-Saxons

A collection of Germanic peoples appeared in Britain in the 5th century AD, part of the Germanic expansion coinciding with the fall of the Roman Empire. These peoples were made up of Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Frisians and others, and are collectively known as the Anglo-Saxons once they had established themselves in Britain. As the Romans abandoned this province in the early 5th century, the Romano-British inhabitants were left to defend themselves against the Germanic invaders.

Unlike the Goths or Vandals, the Anglo-Saxons did not acquire wholesale a well-ordered Roman land that would have enabled them to become its new elite in conjunction with the old Romano-British aristocracy. There was no sweeping conquest under well-coordinated leadership, but rather a slow tortuous process repeatedly checked by British resistance. The Anglo-Saxons were primarily warrior-farmers searching for land to cultivate and had a profound effect wherever they settled, often altering the character of the population completely. As the Anglo-Saxons advanced, the British disappeared, were pushed to the western extremes or emigrated to Brittany, to which they gave their name. However, it is uncertain to what extent the original Romano-British population was replaced or just assimilated into Anglo-Saxon society, and the precise nature of the Anglo-Saxon takeover is highly controversial.

Recent genetic research seems to indicate that the Anglo-Saxon invasions had surprisingly little effect on the genetic makeup of the

population in England, despite the profound linguistic and cultural change.¹⁶ Only in the northeast, in the area of Yorkshire and East Anglia, does the invaders' genetic component appear to reach about 60%, and this is actually the combined effect of the Anglo-Saxon and later Danish invasions, as they are genetically indistinguishable. In the south and west it was considerably lower and in some places that adopted Anglo-Saxon culture, as low as around 20%. It appears that, contrary to some earlier ideas, most of the Britons were far from exterminated or driven off to Wales or Brittany, but rather assimilated into Anglo-Saxon society.¹⁷ The most straightforward explanation to these findings is that during the long drawn out Anglo-Saxon push to the west, which took more than two centuries, the Britons of each newly conquered territory were assimilated into Anglo-Saxon society and then took part as Anglo-Saxons in the next step of the conquest, thus gradually diluting continental 'blood'. It must be emphasized that these Anglo-Saxons of British descent were in no way less Anglo-Saxon than those exclusively descended from continental invaders. While a common Anglo-Saxon identity probably did not exist in the early period, it is still a useful common designation for the Germanic tribes in England including, among others, the Saxons. A Saxon identity depended not on whether the genes were indigenous or came from the continent, but on how a man saw himself and was seen by others. If it walks like a Saxon and talks like a Saxon, it's a Saxon!

The question still remains as to why the Anglo-Saxons became dominant in England and why they assimilated the Britons rather than the other way round. The Anglo-Saxons were a part of the Germanic expansion movement – a people going through an expansion cycle. Since this expansion was in no way dependent on people's genes, the expansion could easily gather momentum by incorporating alien populations into the cycle. Let us recall the main characteristics of a society during an expansion process. It is, of course, expanding. The population is growing and there is at least a conceptual idea of the existence of plenty of land for the taking for oneself and one's children. It is also a militarized society in which most free men are supposed to be competent warriors and it is relatively egalitarian, with little class distinction and the common people exerting strong influence on communal decision making. To what extent early Anglo-Saxon England confirms to this image is debated among specialists. Some emphasise the importance of a rather exclusive warrior elite, although few would deny the *relatively* egalitarian character of the early Anglo-Saxons as compared to the Britons or the later English. The evidence is very limited but an elite,

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if it existed, is difficult to discern in the archaeological record although some stratification is apparent in grave goods.¹⁸ However, it is also fairly clear that the use of weapons was common among the male population, as almost half of the early graves (5th and 6th century) of adult males contained weapons. This proportion later declined and it seems that, at least in the early period, a very substantial slice of the Anglo-Saxon population was associated with weapons and warfare.¹⁹ Taken together, all this fits well with the image of a popular army and a people in the throes of an expansion cycle.

British society was completely different. Centuries of Roman rule had fostered a profoundly stratified society, especially in the southeast lowlands, but less so in the mountainous west. Of course, it were the upper classes that had most to lose by an Anglo-Saxon conquest – power and property, not to mention their lives – and it was they who put up the fiercest resistance.²⁰ For lower-class Britons, slaves or not, things may have seemed quite different, they may in fact have welcomed the opportunity to get rid of their lords and ladies and have a chance of personal freedom and of cultivating their own land. If they could achieve this by becoming Anglo-Saxons, many would doubtless have been ready to do so. In spite of limited immigration, this could explain how easily much of the south fell to the Anglo-Saxons, since this was probably the part of Britain under the heaviest Roman influence and with the greatest class distinction. The lower classes in this area would have been especially receptive to assimilation. The Anglo-Saxons must have been very effective at integrating the Britons because the language and culture that emerged owed very little to the latter. How they did this, however, is not known.²¹

The Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain was not primarily a replacement of one population by another but constituted more or less a social revolution – a revolution with an Anglo-Saxon identity that gradually swept over Britain from east to west – completely reorganizing society as it rolled along. The upper class and its dependents fled to Brittany and only in the extreme west, especially in Wales, was resistance successful. This was probably because the Welsh social structure was relatively egalitarian, not too dissimilar to that of the Anglo-Saxons themselves, and they therefore did not have to reorganize their society in order to be able to mobilize popular resistance.²² It would not have been unnatural for the retreating British aristocracy to make some effort to mobilize popular resistance but to do so they would have had to make some concessions, giving the lower classes more influence or more economic freedom. Perhaps they

did this to some extent and this helped the British counter-offensive around 500 AD, under the leadership of Ambrosius Aurelianus, a man who may very well have contributed to the legend of King Arthur, the latter being unknown in contemporary sources

It now seems plausible that the radical transformation of Britain, as compared to continental Europe, lay not in the fact that its defences were weaker but, perhaps counterintuitively, because they were stronger. The departure of the Roman army would have forced the locals to organize their own defences instead of relying on the imperial government. When the defences broke on the continent, whole provinces were left defenceless and were swallowed up by invaders. The process was relatively painless, and most of the social organization survived under new masters. Conversely, the conquest of Britain was destructive and long drawn out precisely because the invaders did not succeed easily. The only plausible explanation is that the defences in Britain, at least at the local level, were much stronger than on the continent and this is a direct consequence of the withdrawal of the Roman army in the early 5th century. When Roman government disappeared, Britain seems to have splintered into a number of conflicting lordships that would quickly have started to hone their military effectiveness in internal as well as external confrontations.²³ A Britain like this would have been much better prepared to resist barbarian invaders than continental provinces suddenly deprived of their only defence, the centrally organized Roman army. It seems that in the face of invasions, the British managed to unite under Ambrosius Aurelianus and it was their military preparedness (and perhaps some concessions to the common people) that allowed the them to bounce back after the initial Anglo-Saxon attack, if only for a while.

In the latter half of the 6th century the Anglo-Saxon advance was resumed, by which time they would have already assimilated most of the Britons living in their part of the island, which must have given them an increased impetus. Perhaps the devastating effects of the Justinianic Plague, that ravaged Europe from 541 onwards, aided the Anglo-Saxons, and their egalitarian society may have recovered more easily than the British.²⁴ Their settlements may have been more widely dispersed and less centralized, and so less vulnerable to infection. After all, a plague needs concentrations of people to spread. Secondly, because of their egalitarian and expanding social system they would have been predisposed to take advantage of the space created by the plague, much more so than their Briton counterparts who presumably had all sorts of social and political restrictions that prevented them from going out and claiming empty lands for

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themselves. In addition, the less stratified and less hierarchical social and political organization of the Anglo-Saxons was probably not as vulnerable to the devastations of the plague as that of the Britons. Superior organization was probably important for the Britons' ability to stop the Anglo-Saxon advance. This organization would have been weakened by the plague and their ability to defend themselves was thus undermined.

Whatever the British aristocracy did to stem the tide in the late 5th century now proved insufficient and a number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms began appearing in place of Roman Britain. The earliest Anglo-Saxon tribes or kingdoms were small and may have been more than 30 in number.²⁵ But by the 7th century states were being born and were coalescing into a number of larger kingdoms, sometimes called the Heptarchy (rule of seven) from the supposed number of major units, although this is now generally considered an oversimplification.

These kingdoms were the product of the expansion cycle originally carried over from Germania that continued for some time in Britain. As opportunities for further expansion became limited in the 7th and 8th centuries, the Anglo-Saxons had to accept that opportunities were not boundless. Warfare was proving unsuccessful in appropriating new lands and a period of increased social restrictions, demilitarization and growing stratification set in. Settlement patterns indicate limited stratification up to the 7th century (although some is evident in cemeteries), but the *Middle Saxon Shuffle* sets in at this time with a widespread reorganization of land that may indicate a turning point in elitization.²⁶ This rather sudden shift should perhaps be compared to the also rather sudden breakthrough in Icelandic elitization around 1200 AD. In fact, social stratification and the centralization of power in the aftermath of expansion may have followed the same general pattern in England as it did on a smaller scale in Iceland – a pattern we shall take a closer look at later when considering the much better documented case of Iceland.²⁷ In both instances the result was an elite regime that was initially relatively mild, although in England it became considerably more pronounced after the Norman conquest of 1066.

The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria and others that appeared in the wake of the conquest may have constituted a competitive system. States were growing up in England that were surprisingly sophisticated, given their barbarian background. In the 7th century the rise of strong states went hand-in-hand with the acceptance of Christianity, a common co-occurrence in barbarian Europe visible also in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe

later on. Christianity supplied the new, more powerful kings with an organized state religion instead of the loose system of heathen beliefs that was rarely organized except on a very small-scale local level.²⁸ In Christianity the new rulers found a religion to match their power – a religion based on one ruler in heaven just as the king was supposed to be sole ruler of the state. His position was thus sanctified by the formidable ideological clout of religion.²⁹ It also helped that Christianity brought with it a whole new class of people, the clergy, educated and proficient in the arts of literacy and organization, so essential to the new states. By becoming Christians the barbarian kings also put themselves on a level with the Christian kings of civilized Europe, sought precedence from them and shared in their dignity.

All of these kingdoms shared a common culture and language and also an *outer* identity, applying the term *Welsh*, meaning foreigners, to their British neighbours. They even awarded their most powerful king, the *Bretwalda*, a certain pre-eminence and dignity accepted by all Anglo-Saxons. However, aspiration to this title could be a source of conflict and the kingdoms proceeded to fight each other for supremacy in England, notwithstanding their common enemies to the north and west. The Anglo-Saxon system thus seems to qualify as a competitive system in the sense used in this book.

It is interesting to note that in the Irish system, state formation seems to have been retarded or reversed by an expansion cycle going on around the 4th and 5th centuries, but in England states seem to grow out of an expansion cycle as it petered out. The explanation for this seems to lie in the fact that expansion cycles are always disruptive to the competitive systems in which they occur. They cause major social upheaval and a levelling effect that can destroy states where they are already in place. However, when opportunities for expansion disappear and the cycle starts to spin down, there is often a need for better organization in societies with growing stratification and declining popular armies, especially if competition remains effective. This in turn can call for the formation or strengthening of states as happened not only in Anglo-Saxon England but also, for example, in Gaul in the last couple of centuries BC and perhaps in Viking Age Scandinavia (below).

In what way did the Anglo-Saxons show the dynamism expected from a competitive system? As always occurs in medieval systems, dynamic societies revealed themselves in writing, as long as they had become literate. Very quickly after their conversion to Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons became proficient in producing both spiritual and secular literature. Especially noteworthy are their historical writings,

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such as those of the Venerable Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and heroic poetry, the most famous example of which is Beowulf. These writings may have served a similar purpose as the later Icelandic sagas in manipulating identity and creating loyalties (below).

The Anglo-Saxon state system came to an end under the onslaught of the Danish Vikings. Some attempts at unification had been made previously and some kingdoms attained temporary supremacy, but these trends were always reversed until the 9th century. However, when faced with the Danish threat the Anglo-Saxons felt compelled to unite under the leadership of the Wessex kings, and this enabled them to withstand the assault and even to reclaim lost territories.

By this time, the Germanic popular army was much eroded and the Anglo-Saxon *fyrð* was instead mostly composed of elite warriors not too dissimilar to continental feudal levies, although King Alfred managed to expand it into something like a standing army. The common people had mostly lost their military worth, making England vulnerable to Viking and Norman armies.³⁰ The unification sufficed to overcome the decentralized Danish attacks of the 9th century and in the process spelled the end of the Anglo-Saxon competitive system. However, the new state was not strong enough to withstand the better coordinated attacks of the recently unified Danish kingdom of around 1000 AD or the Normans of 1066, who brought with them the latest in military technology from France. After such a calamitous beginning the English kingdom became an extremely important member of the European system that was starting to take shape at the same time.

The Slavs

Perhaps there was an ongoing expansion wave slowly making its way across Europe from west to east – from the Gauls of mid 1st millennium BC, through the Germans of Roman times and ending with the Slavic expansion of the mid 1st millennium AD. The Gauls, Germans and Slavs each began as loose collections of related peoples sharing a common culture and language. At some point, competition among them seems to have intensified leading to a new way of fighting ‘total’ wars with popular armies. This resulted in militarization, democratization and expansion. Perhaps one should not overly stress the separate ethnic character of these expansions or their division into different episodes, the Gallic, Germanic and Slavic, but rather see them as an ongoing chain reaction. Expansion from one

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area stimulated similar developments where it bore down, and triggered another expansion after an interval of two or three centuries. Barbarian peoples confronted with expanding Gauls or Germans would try to develop effective defences and the only way to do so would be to copy the invaders – both their tactics and their social structure. The defenders would have to arm their common people and learn how to use them as effective infantry and this would inevitably lead to democratization. The elite then had to give in to popular expectations which were basically “a country fit for heroes,” as it was put under the influence of a popular army at a much later date by British Prime Minister Lloyd George at the end of World War I. What the heroes wanted most of all was land, and when this demand had to be accommodated the result was a sustained population growth and inevitable expansion.

The distinctions between Gauls, Germans and Slavs are convenient when dealing with the different phases of the long, continuous barbarian expansions of the 1st millennia BC and AD. However, the problem with the Slavic expansion, and the hypothetical competitive system at its roots, is that we know very little about the origins of the Slavs with any certainty. We don’t even know exactly where they came from. Most current theories place them somewhere in eastern Poland, southern Belarus, northern or western Ukraine, upper Moldavia or northeast Romania. This is an extensive area and opinion is divided on how much of it was originally occupied by the Slavs. Since we cannot even place the first Slavs with any accuracy, we have little hope of reconstructing their competitive system.

In fact, the reason we cannot find a Slavic competitive system may very well be that it did not exist. Yet there is no question that the Slavs expanded and that, when they became familiar in written sources in the 6th century, they showed the main characteristics of a population going through an expansion cycle. Apart from the expansion itself, these characteristics are a tendency towards egalitarianism and democracy and a military system based on popular participation.

That the Slavs *did* expand hardly requires repeating. Wherever they came from, they soon occupied most of Eastern Europe, including much of the Balkans and most of Russia, while their expansion in the west reached Slovenia, Bohemia and the neck of the Jutland peninsula. Since the Slavs brought with them their language and culture, there must have been a substantial movement of population, but there is no reason to believe that they completely replaced the previous population everywhere they went. Their expansion may often have been similar to the one postulated above for the Anglo-Saxons in

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Britain, with lower class indigenous people being easily assimilated into the egalitarian Slavic communities. Modern genetic research seems to indicate that peasant populations are remarkably resilient and have often failed to uncover clear signs of Slavic expansion in modern genes.³¹ However, this does not mean that such expansion did not take place, as movements among people of similar genetic makeup are largely undetectable.

A recent investigation of the Y-chromosome in Slavic speaking populations has cast some light on this issue. This chromosome determines the male gender and is only inherited in the direct male line. It shows that Slavic speakers in Europe are genetically divided into two distinct populations, not consistent with the linguistic division into Western, Eastern and Southern Slavs. With regard to the Y-chromosome, there is very little difference between the Western and Eastern Slavs and closely akin to them are the Southern Slavic populations of the Slovenes and Western Croats. Most Southern Slavs, however, are quite different, which seems to indicate a very considerable contribution of the previous population in the Balkans to the modern Slavs in the area. At the same time, a significant contribution by the ancient population of Poland to the Eastern and Southern Slavs was excluded, suggesting that the Slavs originated further east, most likely in the basin of the middle Dnieper.³² The Slavic expansion from this homeland seems to have taken two very different forms. To the east, north and west it occurred without much admixture from the indigenous population, but in most of the Balkan Peninsula there was a great deal. Actually, this conforms very well with what was previously known through historical and archaeological investigations. The Slavic expansion to the north and east passed through territories that had always been sparsely populated and their colonization produced the first really significant farming population. This was not the case in the west, where the lands of present-day Poland, Bohemia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia had fostered prosperous agricultural populations for millennia. Shortly prior to the Slavic expansion, most of these territories had been peopled by Germanic tribes, many of whom apparently departed in the 5th century for greener pastures within the bounds of the crumbling Roman Empire.

By 500 AD, vast expanses of Central and Eastern Europe were virtually deserted. Of course, some people must have remained but they are hard to find historically, archaeologically and genetically and must have been swamped by the advancing Slavic population.³³ There is a significant gap in the archaeological record from the early 5th century and when finds appear again in the 6th century they have a

different character altogether. This emptiness is confirmed by the Greek historian Procopius as he reports that some of the Heruls travelling north to Scandinavia around 511 AD passed through a vast tract of deserted country.³⁴

It was the advent of the Huns in the late 4th century that prompted the Germans to move and when the Roman defences broke, these movements became a veritable exodus, almost emptying large parts of Eastern and Central Europe of people. These people would have left behind a cultivated landscape with clearings and fields ready and waiting for new inhabitants. It was an easily colonized land and it seems likely that this is what prompted the Slavs to move in. The result was an expansion cycle, but of a special kind. We have already encountered the *empire expansion cycle*, the Roman variant of the phenomenon – here is another variant which we can call a *colonizing expansion cycle*. It differs from the usual system expansion in that it does not necessarily begin in a competitive system. In this case it is not internal competition, egalitarianism and the formation of popular armies that prompt expansion but, quite simply, unusual opportunity. System expansion creates its own opportunities through its military effectiveness but colonizing expansion doesn't need to. Through some historical chance, new lands ripe for colonization suddenly appeared, either empty of previous inhabitants or with populations so sparse that they did not present a serious obstacle.

The original colonization of Europe by Neolithic farmers could undoubtedly be characterized as such colonizing expansion, and the Slavic expansion to the north and east was largely of the same character, extending the frontier of agriculture. In Iceland, this kind of expansion was prompted by the discovery of a previously uninhabited land, as discussed below, while in America the European settlers did not perceive the previous inhabitants as a definite hindrance to colonization although the latter case also shows some aspects of empire expansion (chapter 9).

Slavic expansion was in all probability triggered by the departure of the Germanic tribes. Some of the Slavs had already begun to move south and west into the vacated settlements in the 5th century and this colonization soon gained momentum. As with the American expansion, it would mainly have been the lower echelons of society that grabbed the opportunity to found new homes and raise families, thus stimulating unprecedented population growth. The more land there was for the taking, the greater the number of people who could start their own families, and the result was an explosion in the Slavic population that fuelled further colonization.

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Colonizing expansion may begin differently from system expansion, but once under way, behaves essentially in the same way. By leaving the old aristocracy behind and claiming their own lands, the colonizing farmers develop communities with an especially pronounced egalitarianism. Without a specialized warrior elite, these farmers also need to work together for their own defence and must therefore develop a popular army, although its fighting methods are not necessarily the same as those developed in competitive systems. This is borne out in Slavic tactics.

Unlike the Germans and Romans, the Slavs, at least those on the Danube border, did not employ close-order infantry. Instead they used light troops with javelins in loose formation in ambushes and stratagems, but avoided set battles in open fields.³⁵ This is reminiscent of the tactics developed at the end of the Bronze Age that spelled the end of the war chariot (chapter 2 above) and to some extent they may have been an adaptation to similar opponents – the mounted nomadic archers from the steppes with whom the Danube Slavs would have had frequent contact and conflict. While the mounted archers were not as vulnerable to these tactics as the chariots had been, they would have given the Slavs a fighting chance by depriving the nomads of fixed targets and often allowing the Slavs to immobilize the horsemen by wounding or killing their mounts with their javelins. At the same time, these tactics could also represent the special nature of the Slavic expansion, which, as mentioned before, was a colonizing expansion. Massed infantry formations tend to develop in competitive systems where there is a need to maximize military capability through the mobilization of warrior-farmers. As Slavic expansion probably did not originate in a competitive system, we have no reason to believe that the early Slavs ever evolved massed infantry tactics. Instead, the spontaneous formation of popular armies would have forced them to improvise new tactics. Massed infantry requires a certain amount of tradition, experience and drill, and an open and loose battle order would be more natural for a popular army that had none of these.

Such tactics were not necessarily inferior to massed infantry tactics, especially when the warriors gained in skill and experience. In fact, Slav tactics proved remarkably effective against the Romans. Seasoned and motivated warriors fighting in loose formation can be superior to those fighting in a massed formation. Using these tactics, the Danube Slavs scored considerable successes against the Romans in the 6th and 7th centuries, sometimes causing the Romans to complain that the barbarians had become superior to them in warfare.³⁶

The Slav warriors' simple but effective equipment would also reinforce democratization, giving even the poor some military clout. Greek (Byzantine) sources clearly state that the Slavs lived in democracies and even have problems finding any leaders to name in the earliest encounters.³⁷ Although it is claimed that this is the way the Slavs had always lived, the Byzantines would not have had much knowledge of Slavic social history, so this probably only means that democracy was deeply entrenched in Slav society. Some kings and other leaders appear in the late 6th century, which may reflect a tendency towards statehood or social stratification. Most likely, however, it is simply a reaction to an extremely competitive environment in constant friction with Romans, nomadic Avars and others. Better organization would have been an asset and would not necessarily have done serious damage to the Slavic egalitarian social structure.

For many of the lower-class populations the Slavs encountered, their social structure must have seemed ideal. In the numerous raids of the Danube Slavs into Roman territory they captured many people and brought them home as slaves. But these slaves were habitually freed after a few years and left at liberty to return home or remain with the Slavs as friends and equals. Many apparently opted to remain as free men and even sided with the Slavs against the Romans.³⁸ This ready inclusion of indigenous people into Slav society would go a long way towards explaining the genetic separation of the Balkan Slavs from the rest, who occupied more or less empty landscapes.

The Vikings

For the most part, Scandinavia missed out on the Great Migrations of the 5th century. It appears that only the Jutland tribes played a significant part, but perhaps they had less in common with their northern neighbours at this point than with the Saxons and other southern peoples. While Europe was going through an unprecedented turmoil, most of Scandinavia seemed like a tranquil backwater. But a few centuries later the Northmen arrived with a vengeance.

From around 800 AD, the Scandinavians suddenly burst on to the scene, sending seaborne warriors and traders around the Baltic and through the waterways of Russia all the way to Constantinople and the Caspian Sea. In the west they travelled along the shores of Western Europe, even into the Mediterranean, crossing also the North Atlantic Ocean to colonize the Faeroes, Iceland and Greenland and

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reaching the North American continent around 1000 AD. On these journeys they variously appeared as raiders in search of loot, settlers looking for land or merchants seeking profit – often switching their priorities to match the situation. These were the Vikings, who for more than two centuries ravaged the coasts of Europe but also brought with them new people, fresh trade and new towns. All in all, the Viking phenomenon has all the characteristics of an expansion cycle.

When all this began, Scandinavia had been relatively unobtrusive for about six centuries. We have already seen how parts of Denmark may have experienced a bonapartist revolution around 200 AD and similar events may have occurred elsewhere in the North. Although short-lived in Scandinavia, it seems that this second Germanic expansion produced some real benefits for the common people, at least in Zealand, the greatest of the Danish islands. Land probably became more easily available, perhaps appropriated from the old elite, population growth picked up and, to accommodate this, a new *infield-outfield* system emerged in farming, providing a considerable boost in productivity and more intensive land use.³⁹

However, elitization soon set in and much of the period leading up to the Viking Age was a time of significant social stratification.⁴⁰ Warfare in Scandinavia during most of the late Iron Age (ca. 550-800 AD) seems to have had a decidedly elitist character, with armoured cavalry prominent over infantry.⁴¹ States may have emerged quite early and survived the second Germanic expansion in a bonapartist guise (chapter 6 above), but opinion is divided as to whether or not states existed in the late Iron Age, or if there was some fluctuation between states and stateless societies. The reason for this uncertainty is, of course, the lack of written records. The few runic inscriptions that have survived provide little information and it is very difficult to interpret the archaeological evidence in terms of political systems.⁴²

Occasionally, a written report from the North has survived, the most remarkable being the one presented by Jordanes, the 6th century Ostrogothic historian. His information was probably derived from a King Roduulf from the North who had arrived at the Ostrogothic court in Italy, in the time of King Theodoric, “finding there what he desired.”⁴³ In ‘Scandza’ (i.e. Scandinavia), according to Jordanes, “there dwell many and divers nations.” Some of the ones he mentions, like the Dani (Danes) and the Suehans (Swedes), are identifiable in later sources but others are not. Around 30 tribes are mentioned by name (some of them certainly non-Germanic), but we have no way of knowing how comprehensive the list is.⁴⁴ The Greek Procopius (also 6th century) tells us that there are thirteen nations on the island of

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Thule, by which he means the Scandinavian peninsula, each with its own king.⁴⁵ All we can say with certainty is that in the early 6th century, Scandinavia possessed a large number of tribes and that, at least some of the time, some of those tribes formed larger conglomerations such as the seven tribes Roduulf claimed to have ruled.⁴⁶

By this time Scandinavians were becoming separated from the rest of the Germans as many of their southern neighbours had left and Slavs were appearing in their place. Competition had probably never ceased in the North and the large number of tribes mentioned by Jordanes indicates a competitive environment. But from the 6th century onwards, Scandinavia was less a part of a larger Germanic world but rather formed a community of its own, gradually developing a separate language and culture. A distinct Scandinavian competitive system was taking shape.

Jordanes tells us that the Suehans had “splendid horses.”⁴⁷ The legendary horsemanship of the Swedes of this period was even known to Icelandic saga-writers of the 13th century.⁴⁸ It is also confirmed by archaeology, which shows that cavalry warfare was well known and presumably practised in the North in the late Iron Age.⁴⁹ In most cases (except among steppe nomads), the prominence of cavalry is a strong indication of elite warfare, horses and the equipment being too expensive for normal warrior-farmers. The splendid horses of the Swedes are thus another indication of how elitization had turned Scandinavia into a stratified society, in all probability without significant popular armies.

However, Scandinavia was not standing still. The plague episodes of the 6th and 7th centuries probably had a severe impact in the North, but by the 8th century it seems that population growth had found its stride as indicated by significantly intensified agriculture and expansion of settlements.⁵⁰ Since this is exactly what we would expect in a competitive system approaching its expansion cycle, it is now time to look at some signs that a competitive system actually existed in the North in the late Iron Age (ending ca. 800 AD) and the early Viking Age.

We can compare our admittedly limited information to the list of six conditions we should expect in competitive systems (see pp. 61-63). The first, *real* competition, was probably met. Although we know little about actual wars in this period, legends and archaeology certainly do not indicate peaceful conditions.⁵¹ The second condition, that of a political equilibrium, also seems to apply. We know from Jordanes that many of the political units were long-lived. The Danes and the Swedes that he mentions, obviously still survived in the Viking Age

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and beyond, but many of the smaller ones were also still in existence in the early Viking period. Some long-term shift of supremacy may have taken place and it is possible that the number of polities gradually shrank, as sometimes happens in competitive systems.⁵²

The third condition, that of the polities being close to each other thereby allowing real conflict, needs a little qualification. Scandinavia is a large area, and the sphere of Scandinavian or Nordic culture of the late Iron Age stretched from beyond the Arctic Circle in Norway to the neck of the Jutland peninsula, a distance of almost 2,000 km, equivalent to the distance from the north coast of the Netherlands to the southern tip of the Italian peninsula. This vast area was only kept culturally united by sea travel. Scandinavia is patchwork of islands, peninsulas, rivers and lakes, and most of the densely inhabited areas are relatively close to the sea or waterways, giving them easy access to transport and the cultural unity of a maritime community. Before the development of modern transport, sea travel was incomparably more efficient than land travel. An equipped army on a sustained march without the benefit of paved roads could hardly travel more than 10 km a day, or perhaps twice that over hard surfaces.⁵³ Under normal conditions, however, a Viking sailing ship could expect to traverse about 200 km of water in a day and up to 400 km under favourable conditions. Persistent contrary winds could, of course, slow things down, but sea travel, on the whole, was vastly superior to land travel, especially in the sheltered and safe coastal waters of Scandinavia. The name *Norway* nicely demonstrates the importance of the waterways in binding Scandinavia together. It means the northern route and refers to the sea route along the western shores of the country, which eventually tied it into a political whole.

Therefore, Scandinavia was much more compact in terms of ease and time of travel than it would appear at first sight, but this ease of communication also depends on nautical technology and know-how; skills which were continually developing in the region from the earliest times. Around the birth of Christ, the only known vessels evident from archaeological finds were longboats. Obviously of a military nature, they carried warriors who doubled as rowers but there is little evidence for sails, although they may have been in use on bulk-carrying vessels. By the late Iron Age, however, Scandinavian ships had become larger and bulkier and sails are well attested from picture-stones.⁵⁴ As nautical technology developed in Scandinavia, moving about became easier, not only for peaceful travellers and merchants but also for warriors and armies. From at least the 1st millennium BC, Scandinavian warfare seems to have had a decidedly maritime character, not only in the sense of naval battles but also in

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the sense that troop movements over any significant distance were almost always made by sea, and frequently those over short distances as well. Therefore, as ships and navigation improved, neighbouring polities were brought closer together and it became easier to wage war on them. In this sense, the Nordic cultural area or system was shrinking during the 1st millennium AD and this must have intensified competition. The same sort of development is also well known from the modern era, when better communications have forced the formation of a global system (chapter 9).

The fourth characteristic of a competitive system is the presence of a similar culture and social structure. That all Nordic Scandinavia shared a common culture hardly requires further emphasis, given all the clear signs of a common language and shared development of artistic styles and technology. Most or all areas probably accepted a king, although some did so while preserving considerable autonomy under earls, some kind of oligarchy or even a limited democracy. The old Germanic institution of the *thing* (general assembly) was universal and usually had the last word in important decisions.⁵⁵

The fifth characteristic, dual identity, is easily demonstrated at least for the Viking Age, and in fact stretches all the way to the present day when Scandinavians typically regard each other as considerably less foreign than, say, Germans, French or English. There is no reason to doubt that this was also the case for the late Iron Age. The outer identity was that of the Nordic community called *Norðurlönd* in Old Norse and speaking a common language, sometimes called the *Danish Tongue*. Old Nordic law codes differentiated between the local group, the outer Scandinavian group and everyone else in the world, assigning them different judicial status.⁵⁶

Cultural dynamism, the final quality of competitive systems, is difficult to demonstrate with archaeology as almost our only tool. However, stylistic developments, especially in wood-carvings, show a confident and innovative character at the beginning of the Viking Age. The remarkably contorted animals portrayed, form delicate patterns that, at first sight, seem almost abstract but on closer inspection always make some twisted sense. In technology this dynamism is most prominently displayed in the Viking ships.

The Viking way of war was essentially to fight as a light, mobile infantry whose mobility was basically provided by their ships that in terms of seaworthiness and manoeuvrability far surpassed anything Northern Europe had ever seen before. This allowed the Vikings to travel through shallow coastal waters and up rivers as well as on the high seas, making few places safe from their attacks.

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It is sometimes suggested that advances in shipbuilding technology and the nautical expertise that went with it was one of the prime causes of the Viking expansion. However, while it is quite true that many of the Viking expeditions would have been much more difficult or even impossible without these developments, we should keep in mind that technology does not just drop unexpectedly from the skies. Neither does it develop in isolation from its social surroundings. Technology evolves as a response to demand for new solutions, and the Viking ships materialized because there was a growing demand for efficient transport for increasing numbers of people over greater distances on the North European waterways. This demand was spawned by military competition and the emerging popular armies leading up to the Viking Age.

By the beginning of the Viking Age, cavalry warfare had virtually disappeared. The Viking ships used for raiding and warfare could not carry much cargo, accommodating only some provisions and loot apart from the crew. There was little room for horses, so in most cases Viking landing parties had to make do without them and they developed the tactical skill to fight in either loose or close formation, albeit a lightly armed one.⁵⁷ The intensified competition of the late Iron Age would have encouraged the participation of anyone who could procure arms – often a round shield and an axe or a spear was enough – and this would lead to a renewed emphasis on the popular army of every able-bodied free male. It may seem strange that the development of complex technology such as sophisticated and expensive ships should help to reinforce the popular army. Cavalry warfare also represents a complex technology, but there the rule is that when it becomes more effective and more expensive, it reflects a greater emphasis on elite warfare. The difference is that there is only one warrior (at most) for each horse, whereas a Viking ship could carry several dozen – the ship being useless without them. The Viking ships were indeed provided by the wealthy and the powerful but they needed the average and the poor to man them.

The disappearance of cavalry in Scandinavia is something of a mystery. The Vikings became so accustomed to fighting as light and mobile infantry that even when they had horses, they only used them for travelling and pursuit but preferred to fight on foot.⁵⁸ Following the elitist ideology of the Middle Ages, there is a tendency among modern scholars to exaggerate the usefulness of cavalry but it seems hard to believe that cavalry could not be of some use in some situations for the Scandinavians of the Viking period. The reason why it disappeared completely may be that there developed a warrior ethos of comrades-in-arms standing by each other, and that fighting on

horseback was seen as cowardly since it made escape easier and the cavalymen did not share the dangers and camaraderie of the foot-soldiers. This would then be comparable to the development in ancient Greece of the hoplites who practically ignored cavalry for similar reasons, with the added incentive that horses were not easily transported on Viking ships and were therefore often not present at all.⁵⁹

The ships provided the transport for the Viking expansion and also a part of the military superiority that allowed it, and the conquests and emigration that are part and parcel of expansion cycles are well known for the Vikings, through archaeology and written records.

Expansion cycles produce relatively egalitarian and militarized societies. Viking egalitarianism is so well known that it has become something of a myth – a myth that some scholars have been busy dismantling in recent years. There is an element of fashion at work here; scholarly opinion, as most of our ideas, has a tendency to swing like a pendulum between extremes. There is also an element of truth; Viking society does not seem to stand up to scrutiny as an idealized community of equals.⁶⁰ But neither is the myth of Viking egalitarianism completely unfounded. There is no doubt that democratic notions were widespread, or that the typical Viking warrior-farmer had a social and political standing vastly superior to that of peasants in most neighbouring countries.⁶¹ Perhaps Viking Age stratification is comparable to that of the Greeks during their expansion cycle, with their politically important and broad-based hoplites who still represented only a minority of adult males and coexisted with a large number of dependants, poor people and slaves (chapter 3 above).

Dudo of Saint-Quentin, the early 11th century historian of the Normans, tells us that when the Vikings that were later to become the Normans first came to France and were asked about their leadership, they replied that they had none “for we are of equal power.” And yet a certain Rollo turned out to be their leader and received the Duchy of Normandy in 911 in exchange for ending Viking raids, both his own and that of others. As he became King Charles’ vassal he was asked to kiss the king’s foot as a sign of submission. This he found altogether demeaning and flatly refused. When pressed, Rollo finally ordered one of his men to do it. Instead of kneeling, however, this unnamed warrior stood upright while he grabbed the king’s foot and brought it up to his face, naturally causing His Majesty to fall flat on his back amidst roars of laughter.⁶² Dudo is not the most reliable of historians, but these stories do portray the

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independent spirit of the Vikings and the sort of behaviour they found admirable.

Because of the lack of written records in Scandinavia during the Viking period it is difficult to be absolutely certain about the presence of popular armies. However, there are several indications that, taken together, approach certainty. Viking armies abroad are better documented, but since they are recorded out of context with the social situation at home, it is very hard to determine whether they were of popular or elite character. On the other hand, Viking successes, especially in England where they frequently had to fight on land without benefit of their ships, strongly indicate that the Scandinavian peoples, despite their limited numbers, had found a way to get the better of most of their neighbours. Most of these neighbours practised primarily elite warfare at this time, and the most obvious explanation for Viking success is that they simply mobilized a larger proportion of their population.

In several cases, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentions the size of Viking armies in terms of the number of ships involved. As always, such numbers are not to be accepted uncritically but numbers up to about 35 ships are perhaps relatively accurate, while higher ones of up to 350 ships are exaggerations, although by how much is not known.⁶³ Individual Viking forces operating in England in the 9th century may thus usually have numbered up to about 1,500 men, assuming 35 ships with an average crew of about 40-45. Occasionally, forces of a few thousand men would be gathered as highlighted by the higher but exaggerated numbers of ships).⁶⁴ But these early expeditions were not centrally organized, involving only some of the more adventurous young Danes, and each only represented a small proportion of the military potential of the homeland. Still, the Vikings had considerable successes while the defenders were divided, but as they united under Alfred the Great the English were able to reclaim the parts of England lost to the invaders. However, the full potential of the Vikings was only revealed when a united Denmark conquered all of England in the late 10th and early 11th centuries (below).

We have indisputable evidence that the Viking colony in Iceland preserved popular armies until the mid 13th century (next section). However, since the island showed elements of colonizing expansion it is theoretically possible, although unlikely, that the popular army evolved locally after the settlement began. Graves from pagan Iceland usually contain modest grave-goods but male burials almost always produce some weapons, indicating that 10th century Iceland was already a society characterized by warrior-farmers.⁶⁵ This Viking colony also produced most of the written evidence for the Viking Age

that tells the story from the Viking point of view. The problem is that these sagas are late and as such are not reliable evidence for the Viking Age. For what it is worth, the image they project is clearly one of warrior-farmers as the most decisive military element in the North. Even in the late 12th century, when written sources have become more reliable, we can still glimpse the remains of a popular army in Norway.

In the year 1200 AD King Sverrir of Norway, always having to contend with powerful enemies, wished to extract military service from the people around Oslo. However, after decades of civil war that had produced little or no positive result for them, the farmers of the area felt that enough was enough and revolted. By this time, wars in Norway were mostly fought with small troops of highly trained and motivated warriors such as the *Bikibeinar* (Sverrir's crack troops) and the *Baglar* (his arch-enemies). Farmers had become less than enthusiastic about military service, and for this reason probably less effective and poorly trained. The revolt, we are told, produced an army of about 60,000 men, which Sverrir was nonetheless able to defeat with a force of only 3,000. Although the former number is certainly an exaggeration, it still represents a large popular army of farmers deployed in close formation, indicating traditions of popular warfare.⁶⁶ If a king could expect a revolt when he imposed general military service, it certainly made him less likely to try doing so, and if the popular army was not used it dwindled and decayed. In Norway at the turn of the 13th century it had already lost much of its effectiveness, judging by its defeat by a much smaller number of professionals. The whole episode is best explained as occurring in a transitional period from popular to elite warfare and seems to match the situation in Iceland in the mid 13th century (next section).

Which now brings us to the way in which royal authority grew during the Viking Age. By the early 8th century it seems that royal authority was quite pronounced, at least in southern Scandinavia. At this time, a king or kings in Denmark were active in constructions of monumental proportions. An earthen wall, the *Danevirke*, was built right across the neck of the Jutland peninsula as a defence against attacks from the south, the wood for which was felled in the year 737 AD. At the same time, the island of Samsø on the eastern side of Jutland apparently served as a sort of naval base. In 726 AD, a channel was dug right through the island allowing the fleet easy access to both sides.⁶⁷ Such centralized efforts may indicate statehood in some places, which can perhaps be traced all the way back to the Roman Iron Age (chapter 6). At the same time, population was

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growing rapidly in Scandinavia and it seems likely that popular warfare began to replace elite warfare in the 8th century.

From around 790 the first Vikings appear in the British Isles. They came from southwestern Norway, which may indicate that the breakthrough in popular warfare started in this area and later spread to the rest of the North as other polities were forced to respond in kind.⁶⁸ In the early 9th century a powerful king, Godfred, was still ruling in Denmark, although we don't know how much of the country fell under his sway. After his death in 810 AD we hear of a multitude of petty kings in Denmark none of whom seems very powerful. In fact, throughout the early Viking Age there is little indication of strong royal power anywhere in Scandinavia. The leaders of the Viking raids may have been of royal stock but there was no shortage of royalty, and these 'sea-kings' do not usually seem to have ruled as territorial monarchs in their homelands.

It would not be surprising if central authority and states suffered when the expansion cycle began. As the popular army developed, the warrior-farmers would come under the leadership of local chieftains who provided ships and organized raids and plundering expeditions. As usual, the enfranchised warriors looked above all to improve their economic standing in order to be able to start their own families, preferably as independent farmers. The early Vikings lusted primarily after movable wealth in their raids and this wealth was best used to acquire wives and farms in their homelands where they could settle down.⁶⁹

From the beginning, the Vikings were extremely successful. There were many wealthy monasteries along the shores of Europe and they were poorly protected, relying on Christian piety for their security. But pagan Scandinavians had no such qualms and places like Lindisfarne, plundered in 792, seemed too good to be true. Moving freely on the seas and striking unexpectedly gave the Vikings a decisive advantage. For a while they raided and plundered with impunity, bringing shiploads of silver and gold and other valuables home to the North. Silver was the equivalent of money in those days, and as it poured into Scandinavia it inevitably caused inflation, a trend that was reversed after the end of the Viking raids. Documents and law-codes from the 12th century and later, preserved a vague memory of a time when silver was plentiful and cheap. By the 12th century in Iceland, it seems to have risen up to eight times in value since the Viking period.⁷⁰

Higher prices in Scandinavia probably encouraged trade between the North and Western Europe, which in this way reclaimed some of its silver in exchange for various manufactured goods. Ironically,

these included many of the swords the Vikings used to plunder the west. All this silver made exotic imports more readily available in the Viking homelands but the most important commodity of all, good farmland, remained scarce – it just became more expensive. It must have been frustrating for a young man, perhaps after years of hardship and danger, to return home with his ill-gotten gains only to find that he could still not afford the farm he had set his eyes on as its price had doubled or tripled because of all the other young men also returning home with their pockets full of silver.

Some returning Vikings must have been able to buy land and settle down but for many of them, bringing home silver was not the solution. But the very success of the Viking raids had opened another possibility. Instead of buying land in Scandinavia, why not simply settle down in the lands they had been raiding after driving off or subjugating the previous occupants? By the mid 9th century, Vikings were no longer just raiders but had been joined by thousands of Scandinavian emigrants who carved out space for themselves with sword and axe.⁷¹ New Viking settlements materialized especially in the British Isles, in Irish towns such as Dublin or Limerick, the Isles of Scotland and, most notably, in northeast England, where their realm became known as the *Danelaw*.

Around the turn of the 10th century Viking expansion was slowing down. This seems primarily to be the result of more effective defences. The Anglo-Saxons united under Alfred the Great (d. 899) and were able to force the subjugation of the Danes in England. In 902, the Norwegian Vikings lost Dublin to the Irish and the creation of the Duchy of Normandy in 911 marked a turning point in French defences against the Northmen. Some of their expansive energy found an outlet in the colonization of Iceland, discovered around 870, but only for the Norwegians. The Viking expansion cycle seemed to be drawing to its close in the same way as many others simply end when the opposition becomes too tough. But the Vikings had one more trump up their sleeve.

During the latter half of the Viking Age, there was a great increase in centralized royal authority in the Scandinavian homeland at the same time as kingdoms grew larger and kings fewer. The familiar pattern of three kingdoms was established in this period, although some idea of Danish and Swedish unity may be older. Many scholars simply interpret this change as the formation of states in Scandinavia, replacing earlier stateless polities – another stepping stone in the inexorable march of ‘progress’.⁷² But, as we have seen, there are some indications that statehood already existed in Scandinavia even long before the beginning of the Viking Age, and

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these late-Viking states, if they were new and without precedent, seem extraordinarily powerful, capable even of conquering England.

On the other hand, democratization, as we have also seen, sometimes leads to bonapartism – a kind of autocracy based on popular support. Therefore, it is possible to interpret the rise of the three kingdoms as bonapartist revolutions. The democratization of the Viking Age was perhaps more muted than in many other cases – at least this is what recent research seems to be telling us – and this may have been conducive to bonapartism. As the Viking expeditions became less successful around 900 and the free warriors once again found it difficult to find land to settle down on, support for a bonapartist solution may have grown. If the free warriors supported the king in curbing the power of the old elite, they might have stood to gain something and could even take over some lands confiscated from the old aristocracy. By themselves, the free warriors perhaps did not have enough unity and power to displace the old elite, but if led by the royal establishment, drastic change could result.

In the latter half of the Viking Age we see considerably more powerful kings emerging in the North. The first one was perhaps Harald Finehair who, legend has it, unified Norway by crushing his enemies in the battle of Hafrsfjord, probably in the 880s. His successors introduced a levy system (*leidang*), probably in the 10th century, dividing the land into a number of small districts each bound to provide a single ship for the royal navy. This was a completely different and more centralized organization than that used previously, and indicates a qualitative change in government.⁷³

Denmark was soon to have its own strong monarch, with the succession of Gorm the Old before the mid 10th century, the first king to almost certainly rule the whole country. His son, Harald Bluetooth, was responsible for some of the most remarkable historical monuments of the Viking Age. Not only did he erect the fascinating Jelling rune-stones in memory of his parents but also caused a series of ring-forts to be built around 980 of the *Trelleborg* type. Four such forts are known in Denmark and one or two more in southern Sweden – what used to be eastern Denmark. These were military camps, perfectly round and well ordered and capable of housing more than a thousand warriors each, the largest one, at Aggersborg, accommodating perhaps up to 5,000 men.⁷⁴ Harald was also a Christian, and actively promoted the new faith in Denmark.⁷⁵

Although powerful, these kings were not necessarily secure on their thrones. If they were indeed bonapartist rulers they were riding tigers, their power being subject to the support of free warrior-farmers. A new contender could come along at any time to convince

the people that they would be better off under a new leadership. Harald Bluetooth was eventually deposed in a rebellion lead by his own son, a man with the equally colourful name of Sweyn Forkbeard. Sweyn then went on to conquer England, borne perhaps on a wave of popular support and the need to fulfil the expectations of his followers.

The late Viking kings, such as Sweyn and his son Canute (Knut) the Great, who after his father's death in 1014 had to reconquer England, produced the last wave of Viking expansion. Having consolidated their kingdoms and still leading powerful popular armies they were sometimes able to overcome the improved defences that earlier had put a damper on Viking expansion. But successful bonapartist regimes do not rely long on popular support. They may reduce or eradicate the old elite but a new elite soon emerges in its place. The royal court, the king's nobles and supporters, soon took over the responsibility and privilege of ruling. As expansion ceased and royal power grew, a new elitization set in. A new elite was formed, perhaps incorporating the remains of the old one, but gradually reducing the power of the people and of the popular army as it fell into disuse.

By 1085, when St. Knut, king of Denmark, organized an expedition to England, the popular Viking army was waning. When the king was delayed in joining the assembled army the warrior-farmers used this as an excuse to disband. The king, sorely vexed by this betrayal, responded by collecting penalties and increasing taxation, sparking in the process a rebellion which cost him his life and earned him sainthood.⁷⁶ The Viking warrior-farmers had realized, even if their king had not, that they had nothing further to gain by continued aggression across the North Sea. The royal response was to largely replace the popular army in Denmark with a knightly elite in the 12th century. Similar developments took place in Norway and Sweden, although neither went as far in introducing knighthood and the elitism that went with it. The freedom and rights of the farmers were to some extent preserved in the North.

Under the new monarchies, Christianity gained ground, primarily through royal sponsorship. The idea of a single king in heaven as on earth was to the liking of the new rulers, who also saw the advantage of belonging to the same cultural realm as the rest of Europe and acquiring the services of an educated clergy for their stronger states. But even in the development of the old pagan faith we can find the effects of the Viking expansion cycle.

The Norse belief system is fairly well known through Icelandic sources, even if they are late and recorded by Christians. According to

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these sources, Odin was the chief god of the Viking pantheon and was also certainly the god of kings and aristocrats. But these sources also make it clear that, towards the end of paganism in Scandinavia, Odin was being challenged by Thor who had a strong relationship with the common people and was an extremely popular god. The cults of these two gods seem to have existed in partial opposition to each other and some myths and verses reflect this.⁷⁷ At the time when Nordic heathendom was displaced by Christianity, Odin was evidently in decline but Thor was rising to pre-eminence. Personal names that included the element 'Thor', like Thorsteinn, Thord or Thorunn, had been rare before the Viking period but now became extremely common and are still much used in Scandinavia. About a quarter of all early Icelanders seem to have carried names that connected them with Thor, whereas Odin's name wasn't used in this way at all. It was Thor, not Odin, who represented pagan resistance to Christianity and, according to Adam of Bremen, he had replaced Odin in the position of honour in the cult centre at Uppsala in Sweden by the 11th century.⁷⁸ Indications are that the old aristocratic Odin was gradually being pushed from his position of prominence by the popular Thor – the god of the warrior-farmers. As this was happening, Odin became primarily a god of war in keeping with the prime occupation of his most devout followers – the old aristocracy and warrior elite. His characterization as a cynical warmonger may also owe something to the attitudes of the warrior-farmers towards the old aristocracy. The shift of power on Earth from the aristocracy to the warrior-farmers was thus reflected in the celestial realm as Thor replaced Odin.

Thor might have become the new high-god of the northern pantheon but as stronger monarchies were established in Scandinavia, it proved more effective for their kings to promote Christ instead. Odin, Thor and all their kin disappeared as Christianity became the new state-sponsored religion of the North, as it was in the rest of Europe.

As the three Scandinavian kingdoms replaced the earlier patchwork of polities, the competitive system disappeared. The three remaining kingdoms showed a marked tendency to merge, especially from the 14th century when all of them briefly formed the Union of Kalmar. Instead of maintaining their own separate competitive system, the new Scandinavian states participated in the larger European System that was slowly emerging just as the Scandinavian one was ending its expansion cycle and its life.

Iceland¹

One might think that because Iceland is small and remote it has little bearing on world history. This is even true if by *world history* we mean the *grand narrative* of how the modern world was created. However, if our goal in studying history is not primarily to tell a good tale but rather to understand the laws of social evolution, it makes little difference where our examples come from. If laws are valid, they are equally valid in Iceland and in China, and studying places like Iceland is just as relevant as studying more eminent societies.

Medieval Iceland was one of the smallest of the competitive systems, and its entire population at the time probably never exceeded 60 thousand souls, not much more than the average city-state in ancient Greece or medieval Italy. Most political units of this system contained a population of between one and five thousand, although they gradually grew larger and fewer as time passed. However, there are some good reasons, other than my personal familiarity with it, to include Iceland in this study. The first of these is the fact that the Icelanders of the High Middle Ages belonged to that rare category, *literate barbarians* (see pp. 32-33), which means that we know a lot more about them than most or any other European barbarians. Secondly it provides a relatively well known example of how an expansion cycle continues in a previously empty land with no restrictions on colonization. It is thus an example of a *colonizing expansion cycle*, even if its origins lay in a system expansion beginning in the Viking competitive system. Thirdly, it provides probably the best-known example of what happens as expansion ceases and elitization resumes. This is most important, because elitization is the crucial counterpart of expansion and Iceland offers an excellent chance of understanding it.

It can hardly be said that Iceland belonged to the European system (chapters 8 and 9) prior to the 13th century, and then merely as a dependency of the Norwegian and, later, Danish kingdoms until recently. In any case, the European system was at this time a very loose one and Iceland was a remote island far away in the North Atlantic, safe from invasions and free to develop its own social and political institutions without external pressure. Culturally speaking,

¹ This section consists mostly of a summary of parts of my primary research on the "The Rise and Decline of the Icelandic Aristocracy 1100-1800", hopefully to be published before too long, and is therefore not based predominantly on contributions from other scholars. Fuller documentation and argumentation for the interpretation presented here must await the forthcoming publication.

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however, Iceland was very much a part of Europe, especially after the acceptance of Christianity in the year 1000 AD and the literacy that came with it. In Northern and Eastern Europe, the spread of Christianity usually went hand in hand with the rise or strengthening of the state, but statehood in Iceland was still a long way off when Christianity and literacy first appeared. This gives us an unparalleled opportunity to get to know European barbarians (i.e. agrarians without a state) through their own documents and voluminous literature.

Icelandic society was an offspring of the Viking explosion, formed in the 9th century by emigrants from Norway, some of whom came by way of the British Isles, bringing with them a number of Irish and Scots. The settlement in Iceland was unlike most later European overseas colonization in that it did not take place under the protection of a colonial empire or, in fact, a state of any kind. Since Iceland was previously uninhabited and faced no external threats, such an organization was unnecessary for the initial settlement. This migration seems to have been a disorganized exodus of small family groups or a few families and friends emigrating together. For a time, there was plenty of land for the taking, and the Viking expansion cycle was consequently prolonged for some time in the new land where its democratic and egalitarian traditions survived intact longer than in most of the Scandinavian world.

As the settlers disembarked in Iceland, there was of course no law, no state and precious little security, and they had to devise their own political organization from scratch. What emerged was a peculiar system of chieftaincies or *godord*. These were not territorial units but rather personal alliances between individual households under the leadership of a *goði* or chieftain. As a result, the members of two or more chieftaincies could live intermingled with each other, an obvious potential source for conflict. Tradition has it that the chieftains came together in 930 and established a *thing* as seen in old Germanic custom, a general assembly for the whole island called *Althingi*. The most important institution of the *Althingi* was the *Lögrétta*, a council of all the chieftains charged with the task of making laws. In spite of this, Iceland was no state; there was no executive power except that wielded by individual chieftains, and all court cases were private ones. For example, if a man was slain it was up to his family to bring charges against the killer, and if the court decided on the maximum penalty this amounted to little more than a licence for the family and their allies to avenge. Not surprisingly, many opted to circumvent the courts and take their revenge without them.⁷⁹

7. Between Antiquity and the Middle Ages

The chieftaincies were the real political units in Iceland rather than the Icelandic Commonwealth itself. In no way did even these approach being states but were more reminiscent of traditional chiefdoms, although with the important caveat that they were not territorial, even if most members lived close to the chieftain. The formal – and often real – right to change allegiance from one chieftaincy to another, coupled to their non-territorial nature, made for a political system that really has no counterpart elsewhere.⁸⁰ Still, the chieftains were real political players and competed fiercely with each other for territorial influence and supremacy. While the exact original number of chieftaincies is not known, there were 39 official chieftaincies represented in the Lögrétta from the late 10th century. However, as each of them had three members sitting there, albeit with only one vote, it is quite possible that some, in fact, represented two or three local chieftaincies.

With no professional armies to fight for them, the chieftains were thus totally dependent on their followers for support in all matters. They had very little chance of getting anything done without the consent of their followers, and do not seem to have indulged in anything but small scale violence. Armed conflicts were apparently frequent but usually only involved small groups of a few dozen men at most. It seems as if most farmers, heads of their households and the basic element in Icelandic society, were none too eager to risk their necks for their chieftain. Obviously, the chieftains sought to bind the farmers to them more closely in order to be better able to rely on their support in times of trouble, and did so by being quick to support their followers when they got into conflicts, even to the point of deliberately escalating small disputes to demonstrate their resolve and boost their prestige. Another way to acquire more support was to enhance the inner cohesion of the chieftaincy by feasting, making friends, giving gifts and so on. These chieftaincies seem to have originated as pagan cult communities, and a sense of society was retained after the conversion to Christianity (1000 AD), with the chieftains holding banquets for their followers, often under the guise of guilds dedicated to some saint. By creating a sense of community and solidarity among its members, such banqueting made the chieftaincy stronger as a political unit. At the same time, the competition inherent in the system ensured that the chieftains gradually became more adept at courting support, and the political units grew stronger and more coherent as time went on.

Stories, legends, histories, and epic and lyric poetry all play an important role in forming identities, and this was even truer in early Europe than it is today. Chieftains, kings and lords have always used

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such things, not only for entertainment at their feasts but also to build an ideology surrounding their power. People are often ready to follow or fight for something that they feel a part of, and a leader needs such a sense of inclusion and relies on the solidarity it fosters. Words, legends, history and epics are a most effective way of building and maintaining such solidarity. Rulers throughout history have realised this and commanded or patronized the writing of histories or reciting of poetry. This holds true both for the non-state societies of prehistoric Europe and for the kingdoms and states of medieval and modern times. The Icelanders soon became known throughout Scandinavia as poets, storytellers and preservers of legends. During the Viking period and for a time after it, Scandinavian kings usually maintained court poets, and from the 10th century onwards most of these were Icelandic. The reason for this is probably the multitude of autonomous political units that existed in Iceland, all competing with each other and all in need of poets and storytellers to entertain their members and enhance solidarity. At the same time, the number of political units in mainland Scandinavia was shrinking fast. It appears that from an early date, the Icelandic competitive system was extremely fertile ground for the verbal arts. Initially, the transmission of this material was mostly oral, but at the beginning of the 12th century literacy made its breakthrough and from that time on literature began to flourish in Iceland on an unprecedented scale.⁸¹

The flowering of Icelandic medieval literature, especially the sagas, occurred in the 13th century, a fact that many have found strange as this was a time of great trouble and conflict in the country. However, when viewed in the light of competitive systems, this concurrence of cultural flourish and political conflict is not really surprising at all. It also occurred in ancient Greece, Renaissance Italy and many other places. By the 12th century, some territorial principalities had formed from the chieftaincies in Iceland. These were few in number to begin with, only four becoming established before 1200 AD, and together they covered only about a third of the country. These principalities were much larger than a normal chieftaincy, typically with perhaps around 5,000 inhabitants. No longer did the farmers have the option of changing their allegiance but were stuck with a *ruler*, now properly referred to as such, instead of a *leader*, the most apt designation of a chieftain. The advent of the principalities brought with it much stronger political units capable of concerted action and considerable coercion of their populations. Armies could be raised, taxes gathered, and as the principalities evolved they were clearly moving in the direction of statehood, albeit on a very small scale. These changes instigated an intensification of

competition from the early 13th century as new principalities popped up like mushrooms all over the country and immediately tried to assert themselves through conflict with their neighbours. From about 1236 a full-scale war raged that only ended in 1262, when the exhausted combatants and war-weary farmers agreed to accept the king of Norway, Hakon IV, as their sovereign – a decision made easier by the common cultural heritage and a lack of ethnic differences between Iceland and Norway. The king had played an increasing role in Icelandic politics from around 1220, with the ambition of acquiring the island. While a military expedition was unpractical, the king instead befriended some Icelandic princelings and made them his instruments in gaining control. However, these princelings were more interested in advancing their own power than the king's, and when in a position to serve the interests of their overlord often failed to do so, forcing the king to shift his support to a rival. This caused the war to drag on without conclusion, but in the meantime the Icelandic system existed in a state of extreme competition.⁸²

As the principalities fought it out on the battlefield, they also tried to enhance their internal solidarity through literature. Around 1200 a new genre of sagas was created, the *family sagas* or *sagas of Icelanders*, which were to become the most popular of all. These celebrated the local heroes of old, from the age of settlement to the early 11th century, and apart from entertaining sought to transform these local heroes into symbols of identity for the relevant political unit. For example, the legend of the outlaw hero Gísli Súrsson became the rallying point for a principality that emerged in his home district in the West Fjords in the early 13th century, to the extent that its princeling obtained an ineffective old spear attributed to Gísli and used it in battle.⁸³ Unlike much of medieval literature, the sagas were composed in the vernacular rather than Latin, the universal language of learning. This makes perfect sense since they were not intended for a small cultured elite, but for the general population, which still retained much of its political importance. Iceland, through its prolonged Viking expansion, clung to the traditions of democratization and egalitarianism, although the beginnings of elitization can be seen from at least the 12th century. The family sagas were confined to the new principalities and a few old chieftaincies struggling to survive, since these were in the greatest need of a boost to their internal solidarity. The four old principalities established before 1200 AD apparently produced no family sagas, and we must assume that this was because they had less need for them as they already had significant traditions behind them, which would have served to create the necessary solidarity. It is quite striking that the oldest

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principality of them all, Árnesthing, was the strongest and commanded the greatest loyalty of its population.⁸⁴

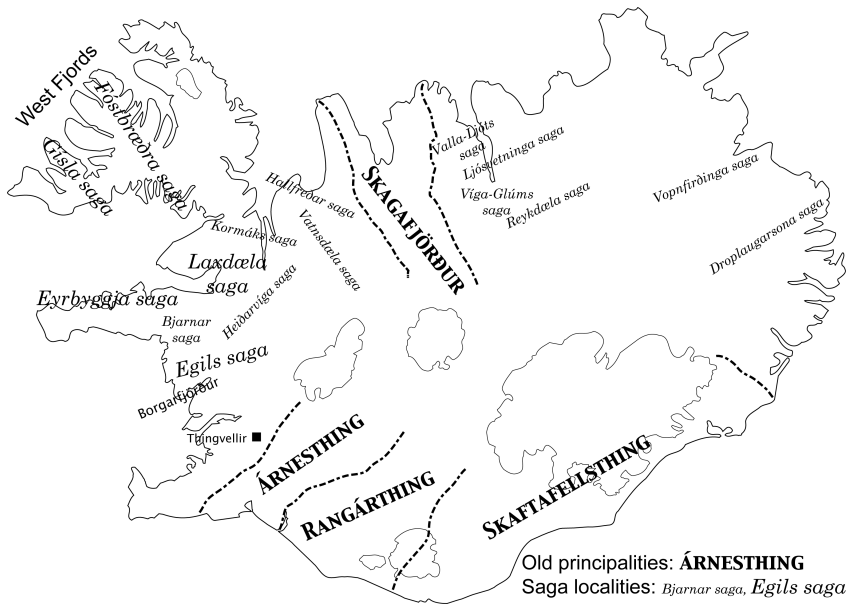


Figure 1. The old principalities in Iceland and localities of family sagas written before ca. 1262.⁸⁵

The Icelandic system did not produce an expansion cycle any more than the French or Italian ones (chapter 8) and for basically the same reason – the time wasn't right. Iceland was settled as a part of the Viking expansion and the system took shape as it was winding down. As Iceland filled up, the Viking warrior-farmers sought new lands to the west, and in the late 10th century small Icelandic colonies were established in Greenland. However, as Greenland only offered insignificant amounts of land suitable for European farmers, the expansion soon moved even further to the west, reaching the North American continent about 1000 AD, which the Norsemen called Vinland. The Greenland colonies survived for about 500 years but the Vinland expeditions failed immediately as the colonists ran afoul of the local population. Vinland was simply too remote and difficult to reach from any of the lands settled by a substantial Viking population. However, the colonization of Greenland indicates that Iceland was filling up by the late 10th century and the expansion cycle brought to Iceland by the Vikings soon began to lose momentum.

By the 11th century, it must have become increasingly difficult for young men to acquire their own land to farm and raise families, but

7. Between Antiquity and the Middle Ages

this did not immediately alter the character of the egalitarian and democratic society that the Vikings established in Iceland. An expansion cycle is a sudden and disruptive phenomenon but elitization is a more gradual process. Even if population growth probably slowed down during the 11th and 12th centuries as a more restrictive family pattern emerged in response to land shortage, other aspects of Viking society survived for some time. The relatively democratic political system of the early days lasted in most parts of the country until the 12th century, but as already mentioned, was replaced by centralized principalities under the late Commonwealth – a change that inevitably reduced the political influence of the common farmer and his capacity for self-determination. This was not only a result of the constant competition stimulating the development of more effective government but also a response to growing economic stratification, necessitating and fuelling more effective control.

Why did economic stratification grow? One often gets the impression from historians, archaeologists and anthropologists that something specific is required to instigate stratification in previously egalitarian societies; that an elite must be created through violence, invasion or brigandage where the strong dispossess the weak. There certainly have been such cases, like the Norman conquest of Britain, but stratification is fairly universal in agricultural societies, indicating a general law rather than incidental episodes. The Normans actually only dispossessed an already existing local elite since English society was already stratified before the invasion. In Iceland, it is fairly certain that stratification increased from the settlement period until the 13th century, and we know that the emerging wealthy men were not outsiders who imposed themselves through violence. On the contrary, they rose from within as respected community leaders.

Economic inequality has long been recognized to follow a *Pareto distribution* often simplified as the *80-20 rule* by which it is assumed that 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) actually first developed this idea to describe the distribution of wealth, in which (to simplify) 20% of the population would own 80% of the assets. Modern computer models easily show the principle to be sound – if a possession of an asset increases one's chances of acquiring more assets, an unequal distribution will result.⁸⁶ Possession of more land in agricultural societies would normally increase one's income, and a man with a higher income would stand a better chance of buying more land, so further increasing his income. On the other hand, a man with little land would have to use most of his income to support himself and his

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family with little left over to invest. Even if all had more or less the same wealth to begin with – as in egalitarian societies – small differences in wealth would be gradually amplified. With the economic laws simply left to do their work, a stratified society will emerge.⁸⁷

Egalitarianism is an exception in settled agricultural societies caused by special circumstances. In the long run it is not economically viable unless (possibly) when protected by an active economic policy. If the special circumstances do not endure, which they probably never do, egalitarianism is inevitably replaced by stratification. This is the essence of elitization. There is no need to resort to conquests or brigandage to explain why social stratification emerges. It simply emerges through a basic law of economics. At the same time, it is important not to fall victim to simplistic economic determinism. Certainly there is a constant economic tendency towards stratification, but this can be and often is countered by political means. Politics sometimes trump economics and expansion cycles are excellent examples of this. These episodes make land readily available to most free men, levelling out social and economic differences.

Colonizing expansion cycles, such as that experienced in Iceland at the time of the settlement, seem to be especially effective at erasing stratification, probably because land is more easily attainable than in any other circumstances. As a result, early Icelandic society seems to have been significantly less stratified than its Scandinavian contemporaries.⁸⁸

But even colonizing expansions must come to an end. Eventually, most or all of the land is occupied, even if it is not used intensively. From this point on, land becomes a limited recourse and a potentially very valuable one. Whether this situation necessarily leads to the immediate creation of elites is uncertain but at least it is now possible. Where there was private ownership of land and it was freely bought and sold, there is no reason to believe that the emergence of social stratification was delayed. This was certainly the situation when Iceland was colonized. Private property was universal, with no indications of any earlier customs, and property was freely bought and sold, although the family had a certain right to intervene if its rights of inheritance were being jeopardised.

Initially, there was plenty of land for the taking and it was difficult to profit by owning it and leasing it to tenants. During the Age of Settlement (ca. 870 – 930) and for a while afterwards, most free farmers must have owned their farms, but as the land became more densely settled, stratification stirred. As land became scarce, its price rose, making it difficult for any but the well off and rich to buy it. Those too poor to buy their own land and too unlucky to inherit had

basically only one choice if they wanted to start their own families – become tenants of the rich. In return for land on which to make a living, they had to pay rent to the landowner, making him still richer and enabling him to buy more land, so driving up its price and making it still more difficult to acquire for the common people. Shortage of land thus automatically stimulated economic stratification, a phenomenon we shall encounter again during the European colonization of North America (chapter 9). But this was a slow process. By the 12th century we find some relatively wealthy individuals and institutions (monasteries and private churches), but those that we know of still owned no more than about 10-15 farms. By the end of the century things were probably changing rapidly and in the early 13th century we know of individuals that must have owned more than 50 or even 100 farms, establishing the level of property concentration that was to prevail for centuries. One of these was Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), probably the wealthiest man in Iceland in his time but best known as the author of several important works of literature, like the Chronicle of the Kings of Norway (*Heimskringla*) and the Prose-Edda. The rather sudden breakthrough of elitization around 1200, when the level of wealth among the richest men increased about tenfold in just a few decades, seems to have been the result of a positive feedback loop between the concentration of wealth and the concentration of power. The limited concentration of wealth that occurred up to the 12th century stimulated and necessitated stronger political authority that in turn produced new and effective ways of concentrating property in the hands of the powerful. Snorri Sturluson is an excellent example. As he rose to power in his newly created principality of Borgarfjörður, he also acquired several landed estates through a variety of manoeuvres, often involving female liaisons, and combined them. His political prowess helped him build his wealth that, in turn, reinforced his political power. Men like Snorri were not only rich but also powerful princelings and they could command large armies, making them extremely effective competitors in the endemic warfare that ensued in the 13th century – even if Snorri himself turned out to be a feeble general.

The traditions of the popular army inherited from the Vikings were preserved in Iceland into the 13th century. There was little sustained warfare (but plenty of feuding) before this time, and so the old military traditions were preserved along with a relatively egalitarian social structure. But stratification was growing, and by the early 13th century we find warlords or princelings maintaining small permanent forces of elite warriors as retainers. The general development was thus one of emerging elitization – the very opposite

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of an expansion cycle. During the wars of the 13th century, princelings often assembled armies that were very large in comparison to the population. Principalities that cannot have had much more than about 5,000 inhabitants could assemble armies around 1,000 strong. These have to have been popular armies, with the general male population under arms in perfect keeping with the Viking tradition, but they were soon to disappear.

The Icelanders, also in keeping with Viking tradition, did not use cavalry, and even the warrior elite fought on foot. It appears that it was considered an inconvenience if attacked while still on horseback and the only instances of horseback fighting relate to the pursuit of fleeing enemies. This was not because horses were rare in Iceland – on the contrary, they were extremely common. Whether this aversion to cavalry was because its superiority was not all that significant, the result of traditionalism or perhaps even the fact that the small Icelandic horses were unsuitable for cavalry use (although many nomadic warriors used small horses) is hard to say – perhaps it was a combination of all these factors. Although Icelanders didn't normally fight on horseback, they used horses extensively for travelling and moving armies around. Their armies can often be described as mounted infantry, using horses to travel quickly and strike unexpectedly. These tactics are reminiscent of the mobile tactics of the Vikings who used ships instead of horses, and boats were indeed occasionally used for such mobility in 13th-century Iceland, even if the geography tended to favour land travel over sea routes.

In the years 1236-1246 Iceland saw intensive fighting with proportionately large armies, and when the wars resumed after a lull in the fighting around 1250, there were clear signs of war-weariness among the farmers. Constant warfare did not seem to be producing any results. Many could see no reason to continue supporting their princelings in war or even blamed them for the wars, and for this reason thought it might be best to get rid of them altogether.⁸⁹ Wars caused the farmers to take time out from their farm work and risk their lives but produced no benefits for them since no new land was made available. Gradually, they lost interest and during the latter half of the wars the warlords found it increasingly difficult to persuade the farmers to take part in their conflicts. In these conditions, they were forced to depend increasingly on their crack troops, retainers and a few ardent supporters, well-trained, well-armed and thoroughly dedicated to their lord. Their numbers were sometimes supplemented by a few poor but ambitious men, even vagrants, who possessed little training or armament, but the average solid farmer became very reluctant to participate. In the years after

1253, armed forces were usually small, a few hundred at most. The most important battle of this period, fought in 1255 at Thverá, involved only two or three hundred men on each side. Larger gatherings sometimes occurred but these seem mostly to have been shows of force for political purposes, without much danger of battle.

Even if the importance of elite warriors was diminishing in Europe in the mid 13th century (chapter 8), it was growing in Iceland. Popular armies more or less disappeared from around 1250, and from that time on, armed conflict was mainly confined to the upper class and their servants, friends and retainers. The rise of elite warfare and stronger central authority in 13th-century Iceland can be interpreted as the end of the Viking expansion in Iceland, showing similar characteristics as had appeared in continental Scandinavia a couple of centuries earlier. The end of the expansion cycle had simply been delayed in Iceland because it was a newly settled land with plenty of space and would hardly have felt much population pressure before the 11th or 12th centuries. Elitization in Iceland seems to have begun about the same time, with a growing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, but it only became evident in warfare as the wars of 1236-1262 proved their futility to the farmers. The transition from popular to elite warfare can rarely be dated with such accuracy as in the Icelandic case. Before 1250 we frequently find the whole male population of large districts under arms and ready to fight – after 1250 this never happened at all.

As the Norwegian king extended his rule over the island, the competitive system in Iceland was destroyed. Icelandic society was transformed from *barbarian* to *civilized*, in the sense that a state authority was introduced for the first time, albeit a weak and remote one. The Icelandic princelings and other members of the upper class were now no more than wealthy landowners who competed for lucrative royal offices and power. But this was a different sort of competition. Now it was between individuals for prominence within a single political unit, instead of between autonomous polities. This makes all the difference since the driving force of evolution in competitive systems is the constant struggle of each polity to survive. In this struggle, they strive to remain competitive, which tends to determine their options for social, economic and political development. The struggle for prominence within each polity is, of course, important in itself, but does not work in the same way because everything is connected within each polity. The success of a powerful person depends on others lacking power. A man can only become a rich landowner if there are many more who own no land at all. Unlike competitive systems, competition within a society often produces clear

winners and losers, and even a permanent power structure designed to protect the position of the winners.

Icelandic literature remained creative and vibrant for a few decades after the end of the Commonwealth in 1262. By the early 14th century, however, it was degenerating into facile romances and adventure stories, even if the Icelanders remained unusually literate compared to other European populations. More positively, these changes brought relative peace to the country, and private warfare was abolished completely by the strengthening of the Danish-Norwegian state in the 16th century. But Iceland remained a sheltered backwater, out of touch with much of what was happening elsewhere in Europe. There was little danger and therefore little military effort was required, as the island was spared most of the tribulations that accompanied the intense competition and the rise of the nation state on the European continent during the early modern period (chapter 9). Even this stronger state remained relatively weak in remote Iceland and taxes were low. For these reasons, Iceland became rather 'backward', to use a dubious progressivist terminology. The country didn't really keep up with developments in much of Europe but remained a rural and agrarian society. Contrary to what a progressivist might expect, however, this did not result in a lesser quality of life for the majority of the population.⁹⁰ On the contrary, the general farming population in Iceland seems to have been better off than most European peasants. 'Progress', in the sense of a society becoming more competitive, does not necessarily result in a better life for the individual.

¹ Cahill (1995).

² For the formation of the 'first' Irish state in Munster in the 11th and 12th centuries, see Gibson (1995). Whether some of the earlier known political units can be classified as states is uncertain at best, see e.g. Ó Cróinín (1995), pp. 63-84, 110-112.

³ Cunliffe (1999, pp. 256-257) suggests a decline in population as an explanation. See also Raftery (1994), p. 112.

⁴ Raftery (1994), pp. 83-97. Ó Cróinín (1995), p. 45. Harbison (1994), pp. 192-193.

⁵ Jaski (1998), pp. 231-232.

⁶ Warner (1988), p. 48.

⁷ Raftery (1994), pp. 64-81. See also Harbison (1994), pp. 155-158, 187-192.

⁸ Ó Cróinín (1995), p. 18, 33-36. Harbison (1994), pp. 184-185.

⁹ The Justinianic Plague ravaged Europe in the mid 6th century and reoccurred into the 8th century keeping population low (chapter 8). A reduced population in Ireland (Ó Cróinín, 1995, p. 108) would have reinforced the egalitarianism of the expansion cycle and delayed the effects of elitization.

¹⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus 27, 8.

¹¹ Campbell (2001) breaks with tradition in arguing that no such migration ever took place and that the Gaelic identity of Argyll developed as it formed a community with Ireland rather than with the rest of Scotland from early times. His arguments are interesting but hardly conclusive. At most they cast some doubt on the scholarly robustness of the standard interpretation.

¹² Dark (2002, pp. 188-190 and 223) not only agrees with Campbell but also doubts that there was any significant movement of Irish to Wales. However, neither of them produces a satisfactory explanation of why the Irish language was spoken in parts of both Wales and Scotland. Migration in and around the 5th century is by far the simplest solution, especially as it is backed up by historical evidence. Campbell's and Dark's view is best understood in the light of the intense anti-migrationism that plagues modern archaeology.

¹³ Raftery (1994), pp. 141-142.

¹⁴ Raftery (1994), p. 122.

¹⁵ Patterson (1995, pp. 133-134) points out that late Antiquity in Ireland was a period of "intensified militarism" and "major political disturbances" and suggest that profound changes were taking place in Irish society at this time. His interpretation differs from that of an expansion cycle but the facts, as far as we know them, seem to be compatible with this model.

¹⁶ Capelli et al. (2003).

¹⁷ The problem with using genetic research of modern populations to illuminate historical processes is that the genetic patterns are essentially undatable. On these and other grounds, attempts to equate linguistic and genetic relationships (e.g. Cavalli-Sforza, 2001) have been severely criticized (Sims-Williams, 1998). However, in the present case genetic research is used to show that the British population is substantially *different* from the continental population despite linguistic similarity, thus indicating a limited genetic input of the invaders even if their language and culture became predominant.

¹⁸ Dark (2002), pp. 90-97.

¹⁹ Härke (1997), pp. 96-97. See also Arnold (1988).

²⁰ The fortifications of Celtic Britain from the 6th - 8th centuries illustrate these defences, as well as social stratification. Alcock (1988), pp. 28-29. See also Hodges (1989), pp. 32-34.

²¹ See also Dark (2002), pp. 58-104. Faulkner (2004, pp. 249-268) makes the interesting suggestion that Roman Britain went through a revolutionary phase around 400 AD and this was mostly responsible for the collapse of the Roman superstructure. However, he thinks that by the mid 5th century a social elite was re-emerging and the appearance of the Anglo-Saxons was part of this process.

²² Ward-Perkins (2005, p. 49) has pointed out that it was precisely in such 'backward' parts of the Roman Empire (also Basque country and Brittany) that resistance to the invaders was most successful.

²³ See Dark (2002), pp. 105-192.

²⁴ Ostler (2005), pp. 310-314. However, the argument that the plague somehow singled out the Bretons but left their Anglo-Saxons neighbours

alone because there was so little contact between the two is totally unacceptable and directly contradicts the evidence.

²⁵ Hodges (1989), p. 25.

²⁶ Hodges (1986), pp. 70-71. Hodges and Moreland (1988), pp. 92-93. Hodges (1989), pp. 34-42, 58-65.

²⁷ See Arnold (1988) for a general discussion of these processes in Anglo-Saxon England.

²⁸ The Uppsala pagan cult centre in Sweden may be an exception but seems associated with a relatively strong monarchy. See section 4 (*The Vikings*).

²⁹ Hodges and Moreland (1988).

³⁰ Abels (1988, pp. 11-42 and *passim*), has clearly shown the elite character of the *fyrð* at least from the 8th century. Assuming that this also applied to the 5th and 6th centuries is not supported by the evidence, which is almost non-existent for this period. Evidence from the 7th century is both limited and ambiguous.

³¹ According to the research of Luigi L. Cavalli-Sforza and his colleagues, none of the first six 'principal components' of European genetic variability (the only ones considered fairly reliable) seems to be connected with Slavic expansion. On the contrary, all of them are best explained by events taking place before the Slavs, which should mean that their expansion had a limited effect on the populations encountered. See Cavalli-Sforza et al. (1994), pp. 290-296; Cavalli-Sforza et al (1995), pp. 147-157 and Cavalli-Sforza (2001), pp. 104-121. However, the method employed by Cavalli-Sforza perhaps contains a systematic error that makes agrarian populations *seem* more resilient than they really are. The detection of population movements thousands of years ago is possibly partly based on the assumption that they *can* be detected, without considering later movements which would inevitably distort the picture. Cf. Sims-Williams (1998).

³² Reḃala et al. (2007).

³³ Brather (2004). Barford (2001), pp. 45-47, 52-55.

³⁴ Procopius, *Wars* VI, 15.

³⁵ *Strategikon* XI, 4.

³⁶ See Curta (2001), pp. 94, 103-113.

³⁷ Procopius, *Wars* VII, 14. Cf. Curta (2001), pp. 311-334.

³⁸ *Strategikon* XI, 4.

³⁹ Hedeager (1992), pp. 201-206. Bender Jørgensen (2002), pp. 133-134. The infield-outfield system replaced the so-called *Celtic field system* (which has nothing to do with Celtic ethnicity) and divided cultivated land in two. The outfield was subject to relatively extensive land-use based mainly on grazing, while the infield was used for crops that had to be protected from wandering animals, wild and domesticated. Livestock were housed in the centre where their manure could be collected, but were led along fenced tracks through the fields to the grazing areas.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Olausson (1997), p. 158 and *passim*; Jørgensen (1997), p. 206; Magnus (2002), p. 15.

⁴¹ Engström (1997).

⁴² Although a valiant attempt is made by Thurston (2001).

⁴³ Jordanes III, 24. Although Jordanes doesn't tell us what Roduulf so desired that he "despised his own kingdom," we may perhaps speculate a little. One of the tribes Roduulf is said to have ruled over was the Rugi, presumably the people later known as the Rygir of Rogaland in SW-Norway who get their first mention here. They are the exact namesakes of the migrating tribe of the Rugians who had established a kingdom in *Rugilanda* (approximately modern Austria) after the collapse of the Hunnic Empire. This kingdom was destroyed by King Odovacar of Italy in 487 and at least some of the Rugians joined the Ostrogoths, where they became known as the sub-tribe of the Rogii. They later exacted their revenge when the Ostrogoths in turn destroyed Odovacar's kingdom, but perhaps some of the Rugians turned north after the fall of their own kingdom and found their way to SW-Norway, where they established themselves as a warrior elite. Scandinavian society was probably quite stratified at this time with no or weak popular armies and this could provide an opportunity for seasoned warriors, veterans of the Great Migrations, to establish themselves as an elite. A few years later, some of the Heruls had exactly the same idea, and after being defeated by the Lombards left for the North, leaving some of their kinsmen behind. They even crossed uninhabited lands that they could easily have settled if they were only looking for some place to live in peace as farmers. Instead, they made straight for Scandinavia where they managed to carve out a space for themselves (Procopius, *Wars* VI, 14-15). If the Rugi that Jordanes mentions in Scandinavia were in a similar situation, it would be most natural for Roduulf, if he somehow lost his kingdom, to seek out his kinsmen among the Ostrogoths, who were enjoying better fortunes. It is in no way remarkable that the northern and southern Rugian divisions could maintain contact – we know that Heruls did. Perhaps the elite in Scandinavia was in general strengthened around 500 AD with the appearance of small groups of professional warriors from the south that had failed to appropriate a part of the Roman Empire and had to seek opportunities elsewhere. This was a time rich in gold in the North, showing that some of the spoils from the migrations found their way there.

⁴⁴ Jordanes III, 24.

⁴⁵ Procopius, *Wars* VI, 15.

⁴⁶ See also Thurston (2001), pp. 52-66, 219-222. According to her, some units may have been growing larger in the Iron age but especially around the 6th century.

⁴⁷ Jordanes III, 21.

⁴⁸ E.g. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, "Ynglinga saga" 20, 29.

⁴⁹ Engström (1997).

⁵⁰ Magnus (2002), pp. 18-23. Bender Jørgensen (2002), pp. 134-135.

⁵¹ See e.g. Olausson (1997) and Näsman (1997) who explicitly speaks of *peer polity interaction* (p. 153), a term closely related to competitive systems (above p. 24).

⁵² Cf. Thurston (2001), pp. 52-66, 219-222.

⁵³ See Sidebottom (2004), pp. 78-79.

⁵⁴ For an overview of Scandinavian shipbuilding developments, see Crumlin-Pedersen (1997).

⁵⁵ See Thurston (2001), pp. 88-90.

⁵⁶ For example, the Icelandic collection of Commonwealth law, *Grágás*, states that if a Dane, Swede or a Norwegian was slain in Iceland, any kinsman from “these three kingdoms that share our language” could claim legal redress. Conversely, this only applied to the father, son, or brother of other foreigners and only those who were already known as such in Iceland (*Grágás* K 97). For a general discussion of the pre-Christian legal system in Scandinavia, see Brink (2002). Incidentally, the term *Viking* was not used in any ethnic sense by the Scandinavians but denoted a pirate or warrior attacking from the sea. Employing it in an ethnic sense is a recent development, more noticeable in English than in the Nordic languages.

⁵⁷ Viking ships *could* and sometimes did carry horses (Sawyer 1971, p. 77), just not that many at a time and not without occupying space usually better reserved for warriors.

⁵⁸ Since we know that Vikings used horses for travel, we cannot rule out the possibility that they sometimes fought as cavalry but there simply isn't any record of this. The Icelanders of the 13th century seem to have retained these preferences since they certainly had plenty of horses but hardly ever fought on horseback (next section). Nevertheless, horses were status symbols among the Vikings and riding gear often appears in graves and sometimes even complete horse carcasses (Pedersen, 1997).

⁵⁹ For the degeneration of Greek cavalry, see Hanson (1995), p. 235-237.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Magnus (2002), pp. 24-25.

⁶¹ E.g. Jones (1973), p. 150; Roesdahl (1982), p. 23; Foote and Wilson (1980), p. 79-87.

⁶² Dudo of Saint-Quentin, 11-12.

⁶³ Sawyer (1971), pp. 123-126.

⁶⁴ Sawyer (1971, pp. 127-128) certainly goes much too far when he reduces the *micle here* ('great army') of 892, reportedly of 200 ships, to less than 1,000 men.

⁶⁵ Adolf Friðriksson (2000).

⁶⁶ Karl Jónsson, *Sverrissaga* 162-165.

⁶⁷ Jensen (1982), pp. 265-266. Jørgensen (1997), p. 207.

⁶⁸ The legend of Hálfr and his 'Hálfsrekkar' companions is possibly a dim recollection of such a breakthrough. According to genealogies, this band of Vikings would have been active around 800 AD and was characterized by egalitarianism, uncompromising solidarity and heroism. It was finally eradicated, perhaps tellingly, by the treachery of an evil king (See *Hálfs saga*)

⁶⁹ See Barrett (2008).

⁷⁰ Byock (2001), pp. 45-46.

⁷¹ This applies primarily to the westward movement from Norway and Denmark, with Norway generally a generation ahead of Denmark. The Swedes appear to have started to settle east of the Baltic quite early but the nature of their eastward expansion was perhaps a little different. As the archaeological picture is currently changing rapidly, it would seem best to leave the eastern expansion aside. See Christiansen 2006, pp. 215-217.

⁷² E.g. Randsborg (1980); Thurston (2001). Cf. Christiansen (2006), pp. 133-135.

⁷³ Myhre (1997). As often happened when conscript armies evaporated, the recruitment system turned into taxation. For a somewhat conflicting view, see Lund (1997).

⁷⁴ E.g. Roesdahl (1982), pp. 147-155; Christiansen (2006), pp. 84-86. The purpose of these forts is entirely unknown. Two of them bear the proper name *Trelleborg*, meaning 'Fort of Slaves' (or Thralls). One can perhaps speculate that they were manned by lower class Danes given military organization, training and equipment to back up the power of a bonapartist king. His opponents could very well refer to them as slaves in a derogatory sense, and this may be where the name comes from. It seems possible that the forts played a part in an internal struggle in which the king sought support from the lower strata of Danish society. This would explain why they were abandoned after Harald was deposed (below).

⁷⁵ Lund (2002).

⁷⁶ Katajala (2004a), p. 35. *Knytlinga saga* 41-59. Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* XI, 13-14.

⁷⁷ Especially noteworthy in *Hárbarðsljóð*, an Eddaic poem which pits Odin against Thor in a shouting contest across a river.

⁷⁸ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* IV, 26. See also Christiansen (2006), pp. 261-262.

⁷⁹ Good English introductions to early Icelandic history (and constitution) are available in Byock (1988) and Byock (2001). See also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1999) and Orri Vésteinsson (2007), whose interpretations of the evidence may differ from mine.

⁸⁰ According to Renfrew (1986, p. 4) almost all human groups or polities are territorial, even when they are defined in terms of kinship. The Icelandic chieftaincies seem to be the rare exception and are probably best explained as a reaction to the chaotic conditions of the settlement period under which householders would naturally seek assistance and aid from their friends and kinsmen but not necessarily from unrelated neighbours with whom they might be quarrelling. Such personal security networks would later be formalized into chieftaincies based not on territory but on personal relationships.

⁸¹ Axel Kristinsson (2003).

⁸² Axel Kristinsson (2003).

⁸³ Axel Kristinsson (2009).

⁸⁴ Axel Kristinsson (2004).

⁸⁵ Originally from Axel Kristinsson (2003), p. 5.

⁸⁶ In the mid 1990s I tried my hand at such computer modelling, using Apple's *HyperCard* (now sadly discontinued) to set up a simulation of 25 'owners' and 250 units of landed property. Originally the land units were distributed randomly among the 25 owners. Each unit then had a basic 10% probability, in each round of simulation, of changing hands or being 'sold'. Reflecting the advantage of the rich, each of the owners had a chance of acquiring this land in relation to his own wealth. An owner with 5 units to his name would have a

5/250 (2%) chance of 'buying' the unit, and another owner with 25 units would have a 25/250 (10%) chance of acquiring it. Of course, this means that once an 'owner' loses all his property he has no chance at all of acquiring any ever again. While this was approximately true for many people, in reality there was always a chance, however slim, of getting richer, even if one started with nothing at all. To reflect this I added a further 0.25% chance that each unit would change hands and end up with an owner chosen randomly, including those with no property at all. When the system had settled into a relatively stable pattern, the result of this simulation was a clear Pareto distribution in which the richest 20% owned on average about 75% of property units.

⁸⁷ Modern economic research tends to confirm the applicability of Pareto's principle to wealth distribution, e.g. Braun (2006). Of course, a *substantivist* might argue that these basic economic principles did not apply to *primitive* societies because they were just too different.

⁸⁸ Bjarni F. Einarsson (1994), p. 64. However, there is some controversy among Icelandic historians on this point. Orri Vésteinsson (2007) has recently argued that significant economic stratification was present from the outset, but his reasoning is based on meagre evidence, difficult to interpret, and he tends to juxtapose evidence from throughout the Commonwealth period. There is certainly no doubt that towards the end of this period, very significant economic stratification had emerged. See also Orri Vésteinsson et al. (2002). In the end, one cannot escape the fact that, at the beginning of Icelandic society, rich treasures or graves, monuments and other established indicators of social stratification, are completely missing.

⁸⁹ *Sturlunga saga* 284-294 (especially 293). In some editions this equals "Þorgils saga skarða" 45-55.

⁹⁰ The traditional view among Icelandic historians is that Iceland was an extremely poor country from the Late Middle Ages until the 19th or even 20th century. This is probably true in the sense that there was relatively little concentrated wealth, but to interpret it as general low quality of living is a relic of an old nationalistic interpretation of history which assumed that the foreign rule of these times had to be detrimental to the Icelandic people. In recent years, this view of Icelandic history has been severely criticized by myself and others (only available in Icelandic, see Árni Daníel Júlíusson (2002), Axel Kristinsson (2002) and Orri Vésteinsson (2002).

8. EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The cultural entity of Europe came into existence as the realms of western Eurasia drew themselves together to form a competitive system. The largest the world had ever seen, this system was probably also the longest-lived as it survived for almost a thousand years. From the point of view of World History – the grand narrative of the human race – it was also the most important of these systems since it put its unmistakable mark on the world we live in, through its global domination. From the point of view of this study, however, it was just another system, useful for discerning the principles of competitive systems and expansion cycles because it is relatively well known – less useful because its size, longevity and the enormous changes it produced towards the end make it rather untypical. But even if Europe would be a poor choice as a prototype for competitive systems, it is still very interesting to examine just how and why it deviated so much from the norm. What is more, these deviations can also tell us something about the nature of competitive systems and expansion cycles.

These peculiarities make it necessary to devote more space to discussing this system than any previous ones. This chapter deals with the Middle Ages, its formative period, and the next chapter concentrates on the modern period, when competition became increasingly severe, leading, as expected, to an expansion cycle.

The System Takes Shape

Unlike many of the systems previously discussed, Europe was a *state system* made up of polities recognizable as states rather than barbarian tribes as in the Germanic system. The most important previous state system in the region was probably the Greek one, and it is perhaps not entirely coincidental that the formation of both follows the same general pattern. Both were founded on the heritage of a great empire – the Mycenaean in the Greek case and the Roman in the European one. Both empires fell to an onslaught of barbarians bursting out of Central Europe who then instigated a period of ‘darkness’ or ‘Dark Ages’, indicating the comparative or absolute lack of written sources.¹ Centuries later, new civilizations emerged, comprising a number of independent polities, combining the culture of the old civilization with that of the barbarian invaders and constituting a competitive system. In both cases the European reserve

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of barbarians proved essential to breaking up monolithic empires and turning them into a patchwork of competing polities. The heritage of the old empire served as a common cultural foundation and helped mould the collection of polities into a competitive system. It may also have facilitated the resurrection of the state after the 'Dark Ages', ensuring that the new system would be civilized rather than barbarian.

We know a lot more about the European than the Greek 'Dark Ages' and are therefore in a better position to discern exactly how the European system took shape. By 500 AD, Germanic kingdoms covered most of the territory of the Western Roman Empire. The Vandals held North Africa, the Ostrogoths Italy, their Visigoth cousins most of Spain, and the Franks were rising in Gaul. There were some smaller political units within the borders of the previous empire and some closely connected just outside it, such as those of the Saxons, Thuringians, Bavarians, Lombards and Gepids. Everything seemed set for the development of a new competitive system covering all the lands of the Western Roman Empire and more. The common identity was provided not only by their Roman and Germanic heritage but also by the Christian religion which had become almost universal in the lands of the Empire and was even starting to spread outside it into barbarian Europe, bringing with it not only a new centralized religion but also Roman culture.

But then something started to go wrong. The eastern half of the Roman Empire had survived and these Romans wanted the empire back. Under Justinian the Great (527-565) they undertook to reclaim what they had lost and the Mediterranean again erupted in chaos as the Eastern Romans battled with the new Germanic kingdoms. But while the Mediterranean was in turmoil, the Franks were left alone to expand their kingdom and become the dominant power in Western Europe.

The wars and tribulations of the Migration Period instigated a period of simpler societies and waning sophistication. However, not all of this loss of complexity (or 'decline' as a progressivist would call it) was due to barbarian invasions. In 541 AD, during the reign of Justinian, a plague appeared in Constantinople, carried from the east. Probably the same bubonic plague as caused the Black Death which killed up to half the European population around 1348, this earlier *Plague of Justinian* was probably no less severe as it swept across Europe, killing millions. Like the Black Death, this plague kept recurring for some time, and it was not until the 8th century that the population began to recover.² Such a catastrophic and long-term drop in population can severely affect social and cultural complexity,

especially when accompanied by political disorder. The 'darkness' of these times was probably caused even more by plague than by barbarian invasions.

The plague certainly sapped the strength of the Byzantine Empire and made it less able to resist renewed attacks. During the 7th century, it was crippled by invasions in the Balkans but especially by the spectacular conquests of the Arab Muslims, who deprived it of half of its possessions. Afterwards, all chance of a Roman resurrection disappeared. The Muslims did not stop there, but in 711 defeated the Visigoths in Spain and destroyed their kingdom.

This was the low ebb for the embryonic culture that was to give birth to Europe. Although the Franks managed to prevent the Muslims from conquering more of Western Europe, the Christian community, combining Roman and Germanic heritage, now only covered limited parts of the region. This was no competitive system. The Frankish kingdom, under its new Carolingian dynasty, emerged as the dominant political entity of this culture. King Charlemagne (768 – 814) not only defeated the Lombards and acquired all northern and central Italy; he also made widespread gains in Central Europe and northern Spain and even exerted considerable authority over the Anglo-Saxons. Under Charlemagne, the cultural area of Western Christendom, preserving as it did the combined traditions of the Romans and the Germans, came very close to being unified in a single kingdom, and it was therefore only fitting that Charlemagne should proclaim himself emperor in the year 800. He had become the Lord of the West.

This unity, however, proved surprisingly fragile. There was very little in the way of a permanent administrative system that could have a stabilizing effect and counter its considerable centrifugal tendencies. As with many other Germanic peoples, it was an established custom among the Franks that, when a king died, his kingdom was divided among his sons. This custom was gradually abandoned in medieval Europe as it made for rather weak and unstable kingdoms, poorly equipped to compete effectively, but the Carolingian Empire hardly felt such selective pressure as it was largely unchallenged on its home ground. Charlemagne decided on the division of his kingdom between his three sons in 806 but since only one of them, Louis the Pious, was left alive at his death in 814, he alone succeeded to the entire kingdom. After Louis' death, his three sons did divide the kingdom between them by the Treaty of Verdun in 843. In the ensuing decades, the Carolingians fought bitterly among themselves, with their kingdoms reuniting and dividing again in bewildering succession. Finally, out of this turmoil there appeared

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two important and relatively stable kingdoms: France and Germany. The Carolingians degenerated and disappeared, but new dynasties rose in each of these kingdoms in the 10th century, the Capetians in France and the Ottonians in Germany, who retained the imperial title and the rule of northern Italy.

When the central government evaporated, local magnates rose to power as autonomous princes. In France, thousands of castles, originally of wood and earth but later of stone, reinforced local authority, and as they multiplied during the 10th and 11th centuries, the kingdom fell apart.

From the 9th to the 11th centuries, invading Vikings, Magyars (nomads who had settled on the Hungarian Plain) and Arabs from the Mediterranean encouraged local leaders to fortify their positions. The internal competition that followed from political dissolution had much the same effect, and in this way disintegration fed on itself. As local powers needed to become stronger to deal with the invasions, there was a multiplication of strong local lords who were not only better at dealing with invaders but also tended to quarrel with each other, so intensifying the need for defence. The extreme feudal dissolution in France was perhaps caused in part by elitization reaching its zenith at the same time. This brought maximum power to elite warriors, making them difficult to control by the central government.

In the process, France splintered into a number of virtually independent principalities that, from the 10th century onwards, entered into intense competition. The low ebb for French central authority was from the late 10th century to the late 11th century and this was also the time of the most intense competition of the French principalities. Not only were they fighting off foreign invaders and each other, but were also resisting the ambitions of the Capetian kings in Paris and struggling to keep their nominal subordinates in line.

In fact, France was developing a competitive system of its own even before the European system emerged. This was the time and place in which chivalric warfare was developed to perfection. These were the tactics of shock cavalry, with knights in full armour using a long shield, spurs, stirrups and a lance couched under the arm, and employing the momentum of the horse for the greatest penetrative power. This method of fighting proved quite superior to most contemporary infantry, thereby confirming the social superiority of the knight.

The building of castles also proliferated in this period – stone structures appearing from the late 10th century. Only three castles are mentioned in Poitou before the Viking attacks, but 39 in the eleventh

century.³ The former would all have been of wood and earth but many of the latter of stone. It has been estimated that in France alone, more than 20,000 stone castles were erected in the Middle Ages.⁴ All of these structures multiplied the defensive power of their occupants and made large-scale conquests difficult and central authority weak when it did not effectively control the forces within their walls. Wars between unevenly matched opponents, in which the weaker tended to avoid open battle, usually degenerated into a series of lengthy sieges where the outcome depended on the tenacity of besieged and besiegers.

Not only did the French system produce a superior kind of warfare but, as usual in competitive systems, this went hand-in-hand with a certain flowering of culture. In this case, we can mention the chivalric romances, the building of magnificent Gothic cathedrals, or the so-called 12th century 'renaissance' of learning, writing, arts and scholarship.

France took the lead in Europe in cultural and military innovation, which is not surprising considering the emergence of its competitive system. But as France was not radically different from most of her neighbours, especially the rest of the now-defunct Carolingian Empire, these useful novelties were quickly adopted over a wide area and served to forge a cultural uniformity in Europe, giving rise to a European system. There is considerable justification for claiming that the relatively small French system seeded the larger European one. At the very least, it played a crucial role in its formation. Even after Europe began to function to some extent as a competitive system during the 11th century, it is still useful to think of France as a local system for some time, similar to the Italian subsystem (next section).

As is the case with many state systems, the French one spawned a frontier empire (see p. 79), and the Norman subjugation of England follows this model exactly. The development of chivalric warfare in France gave the French a certain military superiority over most of their neighbours, and the Normans took advantage of this in 1066 when they gathered a large army of knights, recruited from all over northern France, and conquered England. They took their social, military and political system with them and transplanted it to English soil, streamlining it in the process. The conquest not only exported the benefits of the French system, it also created a powerful frontier empire which, as usual, soon used its newly won assets to threaten the system that begat it. For much of the Middle Ages the kings of England controlled large parts of France and often actively sought to dominate it entirely. Frontier empires frequently succeed in

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such endeavours but in this case it aroused a strong reaction from within the system, which rallied round the French king. The climax of this struggle came with the Hundred Years' War (1337 -1453) when, at long last, the English were pushed out of France. Somewhere along the way the French subsystem had ceased to exist, but the two antagonists became key players in a European system that had been growing in importance since the 11th century.

France and the other successor kingdoms to the Carolingian Empire can be seen as forming the backbone of an emerging competitive system in Europe by the early 11th century. But they were not alone. A crucial ingredient in the formation of this Europe was the addition of large new territories to complement the Frankish core. By the 11th century, several new kingdoms had joined in, embracing the combined traditions of Christian Rome and its barbarian conquerors. In the south, the *Reconquista* was finally getting under way in Spain and Normans were adding Sicily and southern Italy to the Latin West. The most spectacular conquest, that of the 'Holy Land', was effected in the first Crusade towards the end of the century. Even more important was the spread of the Romano-Germanic civilization of the Carolingian core to the north and east from the 10th century onwards. After England was conquered by Normans, the rest of the British Isles were incorporated into the system by gradual conquest (Wales and Ireland) or local adoption (Scotland). Scandinavia and Eastern Europe followed the same general path, sometimes submitting to conquest and colonization but sometimes voluntarily adopting social, political, cultural and economic elements from the Carolingian heartland. The most striking example of the former was the subjugation of the Baltic lands by the Teutonic Knights, and that of the latter the rise of the Lithuanian state in the 14th century – to a large extent, and characteristically, a response to the first. The end result was always the same – the rise of new political players in new territories that were added to the European system. This extension of European culture was most significant during the 11th century when it gave birth to the European system but it kept adding new territories for much of Middle Ages.⁵

Christianity was an indispensable element in the extension and consolidation of Europe. In Scandinavia, the three kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden had all emerged by the 10th century and very soon became Christian. Sweden was the most reluctant to embrace the new faith, perhaps because it had the oldest and strongest traditions of a unified kingdom and already had a well developed pagan cult centre at Uppsala supporting the kingdom. But the Swedes realized that they could not isolate themselves by clinging

to their old beliefs, although some heathen enclaves survived among them even up to the 12th century. A pagan Sweden would have been isolated and left out of European development. It would have become vulnerable to attack – the very thing that happened to the Balts in the 13th century when they became the objects of Crusading by the German military orders of knighthood. Even the Lithuanians, after building a powerful pagan kingdom through successful resistance, finally adopted Christianity when their king acquired the Polish crown in 1386.⁶ The Scandinavian kingdoms used their newly embraced religion to consolidate their states through a common organized faith that endorsed obedience and royal power, and brought with it the letters and learning that were to become increasingly important in the running of European states. Similar things were happening in Eastern Europe as the Christian kingdoms of Poland and Hungary appeared. With these came the great kingdom of the Rus or Russia that differed from the rest by adopting, in 988, the eastern or Byzantine version of Christianity.

The fall of the Roman Empire had released the barbarians of Europe from their constant struggle with the Empire and paved the way for renewed state-building – a process that mostly came to fruition in the 10th and 11th centuries. By 1100 AD a state system had appeared in Europe that proved to be surprisingly stable and, despite the 900 years that have passed since, shows remarkable similarities to modern political divisions. England and France have both survived relatively intact. Modern Germany is the successor to the German Empire of around 1100 AD, albeit through a number of convulsions. The three Scandinavian kingdoms are still in place as are Russia, Poland and Hungary, although none of these states has had an uninterrupted history. Portugal and Spain already existed in embryonic forms in AD 1100. It is mainly Italy and the Balkans that have undergone profound changes in the political pattern, Italy only becoming a unified state in the 19th century. The Balkans were long subject to external domination, first by the Byzantine Empire and later by the Ottoman Turks, although the foundations of many modern political units can be traced back to this time and beyond – the Serbs, Croats and Bulgarians were all in place by 1100 AD as recognizable political entities.

The competitive system that emerged in Europe from around 1000 AD was different in one important respect from any previous system that had existed on the continent – it was far larger. Most likely, this simply reflects the size of the Roman Empire, which provided most of the cultural heritage upon which the system was founded. Many of the constituent units were similar in size to entire previous systems.

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France corresponded broadly to the Gallic system, Germany to the Germanic one and England to the Anglo-Saxon system. This also resulted in a system that was to some extent more diverse than previous systems. The people of Europe spoke, and still speak, a great variety of different languages. They are sufficiently different that there is no question of them being mutually intelligible except in such local groups as the Nordic languages, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. Contrary to most competitive systems, previously reviewed, there was no shared language that allowed the common people to communicate over the whole system.

The European system also showed considerable variations in terms of economy and way of life, from the highly cultivated and relatively commercialized south to the extreme north, where grain growing was difficult and people subsisted mainly as pastoralists or by hunting and fishing. But these differences were not really a handicap; rather they tended to stimulate contact through trade. However, there is no denying the fact that in its early phase, the European system was a loose one and system-wide competition was very limited. Most European states only competed with their immediate neighbours, and the large-scale alliances so common in modern Europe and in ancient Greece hardly existed at all. England competed with France, Denmark with Sweden, and Venice with Florence, but Sweden and Florence can only be said to have belonged to the same system in the loosest sense, as there was little direct political interaction between them. As time passed, the European states were to draw closer to each other and form a more coherent state system, but for most of the Middle Ages it was too slack to instigate intensive system-wide competition. This resulted in a certain leeway for local systems to exist within the European system, as can be seen in France and northern Italy (next section).

But even if the medieval European system was a loose one, it still showed the basic signs of competitive systems. There certainly existed a cultural unity over the whole area. Latin was used as a common language, albeit only by the educated few, but was still vital in giving Europe a sense of cultural unity. Christianity provided the ideological essence of this unity. An educated pilgrim from Iceland could travel to Rome and the Holy Land, relying on his knowledge of Latin to communicate, as even if the common people rarely understood this ancient language, there were always a few educated men around, mostly clergy, eager to learn of far-off places. This cultural unity was mostly based on the Roman and Christian heritage and as literacy and learning increased, especially after the so called *12th century renaissance*, ancient texts and knowledge circulated as never before

since Antiquity. This new-found literacy also facilitated the distribution of new writings, many of a religious or philosophical nature, but many also of a more practical orientation such as handbooks for navigation or estate management. At the same time, Europe was not only tied together by Latin literature but also by a growing trade network. Travellers, many of them warlike adventurers, craftsmen or artists, disseminated new ideas and technology that bound Europe into a homogenous culture, in spite of regional differences.

Most Europeans of the time would have been unfamiliar with the term *Europe* except perhaps in a strictly geographical sense. To them, the world they lived in was defined by religion. They didn't live in Europe but in *Christendom*, the part of the world that was inhabited by those of the 'true' faith or, more precisely, those practising its Roman Catholic version. It is revealing that this geographical meaning of the term Christendom came to the fore at precisely the same time as the European system was taking shape in the 11th century.⁷ Religion thus clearly separated the Christian 'us', from the heathen (or heretic) rest of the world that was there mostly to be feared, explored, conquered or converted. For most Christians, unbelievers belonged to a different and barely understandable world that was both a threat and a fascination, whether they were old European pagans or Muslims. The common identity was most clearly expressed in the Crusades – a collective undertaking originally led not by kings but by experienced warriors drawn from a wide area. The conquest of the 'Holy Land' around 1100 AD served no strategic or practical purpose (except perhaps getting rid of some unruly social elements) but was simply an expression of a new found Christian confidence. And what better way to confirm this identity than to reclaim the land of Christ for the 'true' Faith?⁸ But the new European identity was not just about religion but also about sharing a common civilization of which Christianity was simply a convenient marker. This becomes clear when we consider that the Roman Catholic Irish were, in spite of their religion, often considered barbarians and outsiders by the Anglo-Normans who had inherited or adopted the complete set of Romano-Germanic culture that originated in the lands of the Carolingian Empire.⁹

Just like language or history, religion often serves as an identity marker for nations or other large groups of people. Take for example the recent war in Bosnia where nationalities, defined by Islam or Christianity (Catholic or Orthodox), fought each other, although they spoke the same language and were of basically the same origins. Today, Islam has come to represent a supranational identity, often in

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opposition to the West. This is rather similar to what happened in Europe at the time of the Crusades, except the shoe is now on the other foot. In cases such as these, religion is used as an identity marker for a large supranational community, and to confirm that identity, conflict is raised with some 'others' that are seen as religious opponents – infidels or heathens. But Europe no longer defines itself only or even principally by its predominantly Christian faith. After the 16th century Reformation, Europe lost its religious unity but still retained its sense of common identity and culture and this in fact happened at a time when it was drawing closer together and becoming more of a coherent competitive system. No longer was Christianity the clear marker for European identity that it had been; rather it became an issue of conflict. New identity markers appeared by its side – geographical, historical, cultural and even racial – but the common European identity has never been lost since it was found around 1000 AD.

Not only did medieval Europeans define themselves by their Christianity but also by belonging to some actual political unit which usually constituted an inner identity. Such dual identity is universal for competitive systems – none has ever existed without it. However, in medieval Europe, identity – defining one's place in the world – was often not only dual but triple or even quadruple. The reason for this lies in the sheer size of the European system and the fact that parts of it often had identities of their own. For example, Scandinavia, originally a separate competitive system, retained some of its special identity even after it was formed into three distinct kingdoms and incorporated into the European system. A medieval Dane had the outer identity of a Christian, the intermediary identity of a Scandinavian and the inner or political identity of a Dane subject to the Danish crown. Of course, many medieval states were very loosely organized, and important local identities often developed within states or were retained from earlier times. In some cases, central authority within the state became so weak that these local units became virtually independent, such as in 10th and 11th-century France where the counts and dukes ruled their own principalities, taking no notice of the nominal suzerain in Paris. In this case the inner or political identity was represented by units such as Normandy, Burgundy, Flanders or Anjou. France only gradually re-asserted itself as a political identity replacing that of the principalities during the Later Middle Ages, a process in no small way helped by the Hundred Years War against England. Few things are more efficient in moulding an identity than war against a common enemy.

The Italian Subsystem

At the same time as the French principalities were wrestling their autonomy from a weakened monarchy, city-states were emerging in northern and central Italy. This was basically an identical development: the growth of small, local units, capable of defending themselves with castles or city walls against the demands of central authority. It even began in a very similar way, with the assertion of local rulers during the 10th century.

A major stimulus to the decentralization of the Carolingian kingdom and its successors in Italy was the Magyar raids dating from around 900, which caused King Berengar to grant many private persons the right to build castles. As a strategy, this provided defence in depth but also weakened the central authority. In Italy this localization of power soon converged on the cities in the north that had never declined from antiquity as much as those in France. Southern Italy and Sicily, where a strong Norman state was established in the 11th century, followed a different path. In the north, however, most of which belonged to the German Empire, the remoteness of the suzerain and the counterbalance provided by the Pope in Rome allowed the small cities to emerge as more or less autonomous political units in the 11th and 12th centuries.¹⁰ This happened in spite of the German monarchy being considerably stronger than the French one, especially in the early part of this period, and German emperors made repeated attempts to enforce their rule in Italy. But these were by and large unsuccessful, not least because they required local support that had to be bought by granting concessions that usually increased the legal rights of their allies. As the German empire ceased to function as a coherent political unit in the 13th century, the Italian city-states confirmed their independence, even if most of them continued to belong nominally to the Empire.

Contrary to the traditional image of the medieval town or city, those in Italy were not primarily centres of trade and industry, ruled by merchants and guilds. When they emerged, the Italian towns and city-states were dominated by the landed aristocracy, drawing most of their income not from any bourgeois activities, but from their estates in the vicinity of the city – its *contado*, the neighbouring territory over which the city managed to assert its authority.¹¹ The constitutions they developed early on were mostly those of oligarchic republics, and a few wealthy men, mainly of noble descent, dominated the city community and its *contado*.

By 1100 AD northern and central Italy was a checkerboard of small autonomous city-states that were entering into intense

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competition with each other, as well as having to defend themselves against foreign powers. Even if they were oligarchic republics with a decidedly aristocratic slant, most of them proved to be highly fertile ground for commercial activities. Venice and Genoa became fierce competitors for the Mediterranean trade, which they came to dominate together. Florence, by contrast, became Europe's banking centre, financing all sorts of commercial activities as well as monarchies and their wars. By the 13th century, northern Italy's wealth and prosperity had grown well beyond those of the rest of Europe, making the region far more powerful than the size of the population would indicate. What seems to have been at work here is a kind of mutualistic relationship between the state, which needed money and people to defend itself, and its economy, which produced the taxes, tolls and dues necessary to finance defence.¹²

In the long run, only a healthy and vibrant economy could generate enough revenue to enable the state to defend itself. Even if the city-republics were originally quite aristocratic, they had to foster and nurture all kinds of economic activities that could produce wealth and taxes for the state. In the short run, an oppressive state could confiscate large amounts of wealth to pay for its wars but in the long term, this would damage the economy and impair the state's future ability to fight. In a state system like the Italian one where competition was a constant feature, such behaviour would quickly lead to ruin. Only the city-states that used their power to secure their long-term tax base were able to survive. In times of emergency they could rely on loans to cover their expenses, guaranteed against future tax returns. Even if the cities arose as bastions of the landed aristocracy, their very existence tended to stimulate a division of labour, industry and trade, all readily taxable activities and which had to be nurtured as such. In such circumstances, the division between aristocracy and bourgeoisie blurred (but never quite disappeared) as wealthy individuals, whatever their origins, tended both to own land and invest in commerce.

The citizens of the city-states showed the characteristic dual identity of competitive systems. A fierce loyalty to one's own city was commonplace, as was a deep antagonism towards rivals. Cities tended to be hostile to neighbours, their nearest adversaries, and ally with those further away. The well-known *Guelf* and *Ghibelline* antagonisms, vaguely indicative of Romance and Papal loyalties as opposed Germanic and Imperial ones, tended to follow these lines. Florence was deeply hostile to its closest neighbours, the Ghibelline Pisa, Pistoia, Arezzo and Siena, but shared its Guelf tradition with cities a little further away, such as Lucca, Bologna and

Montepulciano.¹³ Support for the arts or grandiose building projects were largely a matter of civic pride and enhancing local identities in inter-city conflicts.¹⁴

In spite of this there was something of a common Italian identity. Petrarch, the 14th century poet and scholar, identified himself as neither barbarian (i.e. German) nor Greek but as a Latin and an Italian.¹⁵ The Tuscan dialect gradually became dominant as the language of leading authors such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio when they refrained from using Latin, and the Italians generally felt a certain common cultural superiority over the rest of Europe enhanced by their common language and traditions. In spite of frequent hostilities, people and goods moved freely among the city-states, a curious example being the institution of *podestà*, a chief executive who served for six months or a year and was recruited from another city to ensure his impartiality in local matters, an arrangement clearly reminiscent of the use of foreign judges in the ancient Greek city-states.¹⁶

The vitality of northern Italian culture in the high and late Middle Ages requires no expounding, with its well-known flourishing literature and spectacular buildings. The culmination of this came with the Renaissance, the 'rebirth' of Europe, in which Italy played an important role in transforming the loose medieval system into the closely competitive and effective early modern one. But as with other competitive systems, military developments were of the greatest importance, deciding life and death for the competing states and profoundly affecting their social development.

As stated earlier, the Italian city-states began life as aristocratic republics and this happened at the time when elite warfare was at its peak in Europe during the 11th and 12th centuries. As in France, the result was initially the complete social dominance of the aristocracy, but by the early 13th century things were starting to change. In Europe as a whole, but particularly in the intensely competitive setting of Italy, there was a tendency to find an increased military use not only for elite warriors but also for the population at large, thus decreasing dependency on the knights and giving rise to larger armies that made up for lack of training and equipment by their sheer size. Of course, use of the lower classes in war had never been completely abandoned – they had just become very ineffective compared to the knights. Therefore, the most obvious way to increase military effectiveness was by raising the efficiency of the infantry, the military arm of the lower classes. Around 1200 AD infantry was becoming better armed and trained and had acquired a military presence to be reckoned with. This could, of course, be dangerous to the ruling class

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but the necessity of competition compelled it to take this road anyway.¹⁷

The Italian city-states were among the first in Europe to feel the social effects of the rise of infantry, predating such developments elsewhere by at least a century. The relative strengthening of lower-class infantry vis-à-vis elite cavalry caused the power of the aristocracy to come under threat in the 13th century city-states. The *popolo*, the people, became a significant political force at this time, often managing to wrest control from the nobility and set up quasi-democratic governments, although it must be remembered that these *popolo* were primarily better-off non-nobles and not the destitute nor the peasantry. As a result, the *popolo* had perhaps more in common with the *bourgeoisie* than with the *people*.¹⁸ Their political takeover was often, even usually, achieved through their military organizations originally developed for the defence of the cities but now used to acquire political power.¹⁹

The aristocratic response to this was to unite under a strong leadership, find an effective leader and make him a *signore*, a despot strong enough to resist the *popolo*. In cities where the *popolo* rose to power, the same thing often happened as they fell under the spell of strong leaders reminiscent of the tyrants of ancient Greece. In this way, developments of both nobles and *popolo* converged in raising a single man to power, representing a growing state authority. Only a stronger state could contain the internal conflicts instigated by the rise of infantry.²⁰ However, the rise of infantry did not lead to the general democratization that we might expect. As the *popolo* were primarily well to do city-dwellers, their numbers were limited, as were their chances of defeating the nobles. Instead, the main result of these developments was the strengthening of the state, which was increasingly using money to pay for mercenaries rather than using citizen-soldiers, thereby retarding and reversing democratization.

Northern Italy evolved away from its republican traditions towards monarchy, even if some of the wealthiest and most important cities, such as Venice, Genoa and Florence, retained their republican constitutions. In many ways the rise of the *signoria* in Italy is reminiscent of the rise of the modern state in Europe in the early modern period. In both cases we see the greater importance of infantry threatening the social position of the nobility, which is forced to respond by uniting around a strong leader in the form of a king or *signore*. In return for security, they are forced to surrender their autonomy and submit to a much stronger and centralized state. Only by rallying round the state could they ward off the democratization

process waiting to happen once the elite warfare of knighthood was in decline.

The state managed largely to contain this potential democratization by relying on mercenaries for its mass armies instead of its own subjects. After 1260 they became a significant element in north Italian warfare, firstly in relation to the attempts of foreign sovereigns to gain influence (Manfred of Sicily and Charles of Anjou) by using large mercenary armies, to which the locals had to respond by hiring mercenaries of their own.²¹ Mercenaries had no stake in the internal politics of the state and were content as long as they were paid, whereas a citizen militia was likely to use its military power in support of its political demands. As a result, mercenaries were a safer bet for the burgeoning state but required money, so necessitating a much more sophisticated fiscal policy. Tolls and taxes became increasingly important for the state's survival as competition in late medieval Italy gradually turned into a contest in the ability to finance mercenary armies. In all of this, Italy of the Late Middle Ages foreshadowed developments in early modern Europe (chapter 9).

But the Italian system did not last. While it was flourishing, the larger European system was coming into its own, and towards the close of the Middle Ages, Italy was dragged into its orbit. Around 1500 AD, when the modern period replaced the Middle Ages, France, Spain and the Habsburgs, the emerging great powers of Europe, forced themselves on Italy. The wealth of the city-states was just too tempting for these monarchs, who by now were in constant need of money as they too were beginning to rely on mercenaries. It was precisely the wealth of the Italians that enabled them to hold out for as long as they did – they could pay for armies that were as large and effective as those of much more populous states. In the 15th century, war became rampant in Italy and mercenaries from all over Europe flocked there to make their fortunes. In the end, the Italian city-states proved no match for large national states such as that, which was emerging in France. In 1494, Charles VIII of France marched his conquering army into Italy, supported by his revolutionary mobile artillery that reduced medieval walls to rubble. The French were eventually opposed by the equally modern and powerful Spanish, and Italy became a battleground for European powers – an unenviable position it maintained throughout the early modern period. Most of the surviving Italian states became dependencies of the great powers, particularly Habsburg-Spain. Those that retained their independence, such as Venice, once a great power in the Italian system, were reduced to second or third rate European states.²²

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The final period of the Italian system produced the Renaissance that so greatly shaped the cultural and intellectual history of Europe. But the Italians also showed the way in the development of the state and of mercenary warfare – also an important part of European history, albeit not as universally acclaimed. But as Europe as a whole became an effective competitive system there was no longer any room for local systems such as the Italian one. It could not and did not survive. As Europe forced itself on Italy, the Italian states were compelled to compete in the European system where, because of their small size, they were at a disadvantage.²³ Unlike France, also a competitive system in the 11th and 12th centuries, Italy did not unite in a single kingdom but maintained its division to the end of the Middle Ages, thus fostering the Renaissance but ensuring at the same time that Italy would not be a great power in the early modern period. However, the debt that Europe owes to the Italian system is nonetheless great as the gifts of Italian civilization disseminated throughout Europe. Indeed, in some ways we can say that the development of early modern Europe followed a path laid down by Italy.²⁴

Knights and Soldiers

In most of Western Europe, infantry nearly disappeared in the latter half of the 1st millennium, and wars were fought almost exclusively by elite cavalry from the mid-ninth century.²⁵ By the beginning of the 2nd millennium, cavalry ruled supreme both on the battlefield and as a social class. This was the time at which the European competitive system was taking shape, and the competition within it certainly played a part in developing to its full potential the military system that ensured the warrior elite's prominent position.

The lands of the Carolingian Empire were to become the heartland of 'feudal' Europe and this is where an improved form of cavalry warfare developed, that of the knights. Technological improvements were encouraged, such as the adoption the stirrup, which made the knight more steady in the saddle and capable of delivering more powerful blows without losing his balance. Spurs made his control of his horse less dependent on the use of his hands, which could thereby better wield weapons. There was also the new tactical development of using cavalry as shock troops. Previously, cavalry had been employed mostly as infantry support, protecting the wings, harrying the enemy from a distance, giving chase and launching the occasional flank attack. Now it was used for full-blown

frontal attacks using lances couched under the armpit, a method that became predominant in the 11th century.²⁶ These tactics subjected the knight to intense melee fighting, which also necessitated better armour for both the knight and his specialized war-horse to minimize the loss of these valuable assets.

There is no doubt that medieval knights were first-class elite warriors and superb instruments of war.²⁷ They allowed the Normans to conquer England and Sicily in the 11th century, led the Reconquista in Spain and ensured the success of Crusades in the Holy Land and the Baltic. However, military superiority isn't always what it seems and it appears that for the knights it was partly ideological. The military elite of the knights was also a social and political elite – a ruling class. Naturally, members of this ruling class considered themselves far superior to the lower classes in every respect and this applied, of course, to warfare – one of the spheres in which this ideology was in fact justified. But even if the knights were superior to common foot-soldiers in war, this superiority was systematically exaggerated by the ruling ideology.

Whether they are called Batman, Superman or Sir Lancelot du Lac, the cult of 'superheroes' is inherently elitist, projecting the myth that there are some individuals who are vastly superior to the rest of us, at least when it comes to the proficient use of violence. For the warrior-elite, such myths were useful in keeping the commoners in their place – if they thought that they had no chance of succeeding against the knightly superheroes they were less likely to try. Chivalric romances, the literature of the warrior class, demonstrate this clearly when they habitually make their heroes, be they King Arthur, Sir Lancelot or Roland, slay multitudes, even thousands, of opponents, singlehandedly. Although we don't know just how seriously such claims were taken, there is no doubt about the tendency to exaggerate the worth of knights vis-à-vis infantry. In turn, this ideology helped the knights win battles. As Tacitus remarked, defeat always starts in the eyes, and there can be few more terrifying sights than a host of armoured knights, bristling with lances, charging at full gallop. The 'knowledge' that the knights were unbeatable would have made it very difficult for an infantryman not to turn tail and flee before they struck.

The great chivalric age spanned the 11th and 12th centuries, during which time the knight dominated battlefields over most of Europe. The fact that this was not simply a matter of military expediency but also a means of keeping the lower orders in their place is demonstrated by the peace brotherhoods of the late 12th century, known from their uniform headgear as the *White Hoods*. The French

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countryside was being plagued by marauding mercenaries rendered unemployed by the return of peace between France and England, when a simple carpenter called Durand formed the White Hoods as a brotherhood of peasants to restore order. In 1183, they defeated several bands of mercenaries and consequently began to realize their own power and try to use it to demand social and political reforms for the peasants. Although the king and the aristocracy had approved of the White Hoods when they were ridding the land of mercenaries, they now decided that they were mad rebels and, somewhat ironically, brought in more mercenaries to help crush them. As the time of effective infantry armies had not yet arrived, this task was quickly achieved but the whole incident served to show how military, social and political power were all interlinked and the dangers inherent in allowing commoners to arm themselves.²⁸

Nevertheless, competitive pressure made change inevitable and by the 13th century, armies were beginning to develop new characteristics. The knight's equipment tended to become more and more sophisticated, increasing both his military superiority and chances of survival. But this came at a price and made knighthood more of an economic burden. As rulers became stronger and a semblance of internal peace returned, more and more aristocrats shunned knighthood and preferred to spend their life in the comfort of their rural estates or town houses. Kings and other rulers were usually happy to allow this and accept payment instead of military service, which made them able to maintain a more professional force of warriors in times of war and also helped strengthen the role of central government. During the 13th century, as money began replacing payment in kind in medieval society, knightly forces were increasingly made up of paid professionals (usually of aristocratic background) rather than knights owing military service, and even the latter had started to receive wages.²⁹ These forces were supplemented by well-armoured and well equipped archers and footsoldiers or *serjeants* (hence the modern military rank of *sergeant*) who were much less costly to maintain but still highly effective.

Authorities everywhere, be they kings, clergy, fiefholders or towns, began involving commoners in their wars by introducing military obligations. These efforts sometimes took the form of legislation requiring subjects to possess arms in accordance to their means and even the poor and unfree were expected to do their part. From the early 14th century the French crown claimed the right to summon all the subjects of the kingdom fit to bear arms, and similar developments took place in England even earlier.³⁰ The communal armies of Flanders steadily grew in importance during the 13th

century, effectively replacing cavalry with infantry as the most effective military arm. It became mandatory that every man should possess armament according to his wealth, and the result was not only greater military effectiveness but also a population of commoners that became increasingly politically assertive.³¹ Broadening the military base obviously served to enhance the competitiveness of the realm and is best explained by the ongoing competition of the European system – the beginning of the militarization process that we have come to expect in competitive systems. The Italian subsystem had already displayed these developments but they now became widely noticeable in Western Europe.

While the knightly class still remained comfortable in its belief in its military superiority, it was in fact being slowly undermined, a fact devastatingly revealed in a series of battles of the early 14th century. The underdogs, infantry often made up of burgers and peasants with few or no knights among them, were now able to win several decisive victories over substantial knightly armies. In 1302 the burgers of Flanders destroyed the flower of French chivalry at Courtrai and seemed almost as shocked by the outcome as the knights that managed to escape. In 1314, an army of Scottish infantry defeated English knights at Bannockburn, and the next year saw a force of Swiss peasants rout the knightly force of Duke Leopold of Austria. In 1319 the peasants of Dithmarschen in northern Germany followed suit by defeating the knights of Holstein.³² These and other battles of the era proved that, given the right circumstances, infantry could defeat a large force of knights. Many battles fought in various parts of Europe in the first half of the 14th century clearly showed that by exercising caution and sophisticated battle tactics, infantry armies could consistently defeat cavalry.³³ Some of these successful infantry forces, such as the Scots, Swiss and the Dithmarschen peasants, benefitted from having preserved archaic, infantry-based military organizations not up to date with current chivalric warfare. As infantry became important once again, they emerged already adapted to these changes and therefore disproportionately successful.³⁴

In many cases infantry made good use of terrain in order to cancel out the knights' superiority by making their horses a liability rather than an asset, and for this purpose often used ditches or swamps to channel the cavalry attack onto an unbreakable wall of massed infantry. In the resulting throng, the knights lost their cohesion and mobility and fell easy prey to their social inferiors. While these battles did not destroy knightly superiority once and for all, they did serve to drive home the point that infantry was a force to be reckoned with and should not be underestimated or ignored. The knightly armies

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learned this lesson well and remained important on the battlefield for most of the 14th and 15th centuries, but infantry was definitely becoming more important.³⁵ Perhaps it was the rulers themselves who had instigated this shift as they strove to save money by using infantry instead of knights, thus necessitating the development of infantry tactics capable of dealing with them. The peasants' will to free themselves of aristocratic oppression certainly also played a part, at least in the case of the Swiss and the Dithmarschen. But most importantly, the battles of the early 14th century signalled a shift in military history away from elite warfare and towards mass warfare.

Because infantry was cheaper to maintain and used commoners as soldiers, any state or realm had the potential to assemble infantry armies considerably larger than the small forces of elite cavalry that it could muster. However, to make them effective, the right tactics and equipment had to be developed and employed. From the elite's point of view, the problem with doing this was the danger of putting effective weapons and tactics at the disposal of the common people. The equipment and tactics of a professional mass army could be adopted relatively easily by the commoners to create a popular army, transferring not only military but also political power to the people. Under the pressure of intense competition, it may nevertheless become unavoidable to raise mass armies. But the elite and the rulers, who owed their exalted positions to the demise of earlier popular armies, would strive to prevent these military developments from leading to their resurrection and the consequent democratization and loss of power.

In the meantime, competition within the European system ensured that the development of mass armies could not be stopped. This not only required using more people in warfare, but also tactics and armament that made them more effective than before. During the 13th and 14th centuries, the equipment of the footsoldiers was constantly improving, with more effective weapons and better armour and more of it. With each success against cavalry, infantry gained in confidence that in turn increased their chances of success. Since a horse will always slow down when it approaches a solid obstacle, a dense wall of properly equipped infantry is well able to stop a cavalry charge. All they need is the confidence to stand their ground instead of breaking rank and running away.

New weapons also came into play such as the halberd, an axe on a long shaft. Often also fitted with a spear point and a hook, the halberd proved an efficient weapon against armoured knights since it was capable of delivering terrific blows that broke through armour, while the hook was used to unhorse the knight. Effective even in untrained

hands, the crossbow also became very common, despite objections to its unchivalrous nature, and large forces of crossbowmen, mounted or on foot, existed in the 13th century. Old weapons such as the powerful longbow were also used in a new way. In the hands of trained archers, it had a much greater rate of fire than the crossbow and ensured several English victories over French knights during the Hundred Years' War. These were usually achieved by forming large contingents of bowmen working in concert to shower the enemy with their deadly arrows.³⁶ Firearms also first appeared in the 14th century in the guise of artillery but didn't become really effective until the 15th century, the latter half of which also saw the first widespread use of handheld guns, soon to drive the armoured knights from the battlefield for good. The English fought the Hundred Years' War in France largely by using conscripts and volunteers of common origins. Those who survived to return home sometimes proved a disruptive element in English society and must also have disseminated knowledge of military matters, thereby improving any chance of success that a popular revolt may have had.³⁷

These military developments constituted a significant shift from elite warfare to mass warfare. Even the growing potential of popular armies – the general population under arms – was occasionally realized in the Late Middle Ages (next section). In view of previous experiences in European history, it is not surprising that these military changes also resulted in a power shift away from the aristocracy, the core of the combined social and warrior elite. This power was transferred not only to the emerging state but also to the lower classes.³⁸ At the same time, the authority that the lords of manors had exercised over their peasants was diminishing, and serfdom virtually disappeared in large areas. Not all of this, however, was a direct result of purely military developments. Particularly in the more densely settled west, the intensity of elite competition was such that peasants could often secure concessions from their lords simply because the latter could not afford the distraction of domestic or internal problems when locked in a life or death external struggle.³⁹

By whatever means, peasant communities were again coming into their own and reclaiming the right to order their own affairs. This tendency was to some extent supported by monarchs who desired to establish a direct link between themselves and their people, cutting out the aristocratic middle man. It is no coincidence that the legend of Robin Hood, who stole from the rich and gave to the poor, forged a certain resonance between Robin's 'merry men', who were essentially peasants, and the good King Richard, excluding the corrupt and aristocratic sheriff of Nottingham. The social struggle of the Late

Middle Ages and the early modern period had three principal players: the aristocracy, the state and the commoners and any two of these could ally against the third given the right circumstances. One of the hallmarks of expansion cycles is democratization – the growing power of commoners – and as the Late Middle Ages showed significant tendencies of this type, it is to these we must now turn.

The Rise of Popular Power

The peasant population of Europe had been growing by leaps and bounds since the 11th century. By the late 13th century this growth was levelling out until it came to a halt in the early 14th century. This population increase coincided with a time of political expansion during which the European system was enlarged by conquest or acculturation and produced a situation during the High Middle Ages that looks, at least superficially, rather like an expansion cycle.⁴⁰ However, although there certainly was expansion of sorts it was certainly not an *expansion cycle* as defined in this book.

Not every instance of population growth coupled with political expansion signifies an expansion cycle, any more than every case of coughing coupled with a high fever signifies influenza. Different causes can lead to similar symptoms, and a correct diagnosis depends on careful investigation and a knowledge of what lies behind the symptoms. Behind every expansion cycle we find the militarization, democratization and expansion processes, but neither militarization nor democratization was part of the high medieval expansion. On the contrary, wars were fought primarily with small elite armies rather than large popular forces, and the aristocracy ruled supreme over the common people. However, the military superiority of the European system stimulated a certain level of expansion that was sometimes enhanced by elite-sponsored emigration of the surplus peasant population.

Population growth in agrarian societies usually signifies a relative ease of acquiring land and starting a family. More people marry – and at an earlier age – and have more children, but the crucial ingredient is an increased availability of land.⁴¹ Sometimes this land is made available by migrating to new territories, but colonization can also be local when underutilized land, such as forests, is cleared to make way for fields. Another way to increase the availability of land is simply to split the existing farmland into smaller parcels, necessitating more labour-intensive cultivation. All these means of accommodating more families were used during the medieval expansion but we should not

think that this happened automatically. Access to land is always under social and political control – whoever effectively controls land must allow it to be settled or split up. Therefore, the population growth of the High Middle Ages had its roots in a social and political situation that encouraged the formation of new households by making land available to them.⁴²

While this is not the place to delve into the dynamics of medieval demography, whatever it was that encouraged population growth extending into the mid-13th century, it was certainly not a powerful agrarian class that demanded and obtained more land for itself, as happens during expansion cycles. On the contrary, the medieval growth period coincided with an unusually powerless peasantry, and it is perhaps significant that growth came to an end at precisely the same time as the old elite was losing some of its power and popular power was on the rise.⁴³

This shift in power was revealed in the numerous peasant or popular revolts that became a recurring feature in late medieval Europe. Some of them were influenced by the Black Death or plague that struck Europe around 1348, killing millions and causing a massive drop in population.⁴⁴ The surviving peasants were rewarded by more available land and greater economic leeway. Rents fell and wages rose, both trends highly detrimental to the interests of the aristocracy, state and church. These great landowners often tried to use their political power, or simply plain force, to check the economic effects of the plague by regulating wages, raising rents or reverting to exacting work duties instead of cash payments. Along with a variety of other political and economic issues, these attempts played a part in igniting risings such as the Jacquerie in France in 1358 or Wat Tyler's Peasants' Revolt in England, in 1381.⁴⁵ Massive peasant revolts occurred repeatedly up until the 16th century, one of the more notable of which was the Peasants' War of 1524-25 in Germany, when the religious reformer, Martin Luther, sided politically with the rulers, thus ensuring the survival of Lutheranism. But contrary to popular belief, peasant revolts were not always borne out of destitution and hunger. The instigators were frequently members of the better-off peasantry, occasionally even of the lower nobility, and their demands were not only for improved economic conditions but also for political and social reforms.⁴⁶ The peasants' rising of 1434-36 in Sweden, under the leadership of Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson, clearly shows this political dimension. At this time Sweden, along with Norway and Denmark, belonged to the Union of Kalmar, which was dominated by the Danes. The rising, provoked by the oppressive policies of King

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Eric, was joined by most of the Swedish aristocracy and succeeded in securing Swedish rights against the Crown.⁴⁷

There is no doubt that the peasant revolts of the Later Middle Ages had varied social and economic agendas, many of them connected with the effects of the Black Death, but this does not explain their success. For even if most of them were eventually crushed, it often took months or years of unrest and the authorities frequently had to make certain concessions in any case.⁴⁸ This contrasts starkly with the scarcity of significant peasant revolts in the 11th and 12th centuries when the peasants were in fact far more oppressed by the aristocracy. Therefore, the successes of the peasants, although limited, should be explained by the same processes discussed earlier, i.e. the draining of aristocratic power to the lower classes as well as the rising state and ultimately by changes in warfare favouring mass armies rather than elite, aristocratic ones. In the Late Middle Ages the knights simply didn't have the same military superiority that they had enjoyed earlier, and mass armies such as those employed by the state or gathered by rebelling peasants had become serious contenders. The peasants of the High Middle Ages had no answer to the military might of chivalry; by the 14th century they had these answers.

Switzerland was essentially created by successful peasant resistance. It began in 1291 when three cantons of free peasants pledged mutual assistance against all aggressors, and these included their nominal suzerains, the powerful Habsburg dynasty, which ruled over an extensive realm in Central Europe. It is no coincidence that the battle of Morgarten in 1315, when Swiss infantry soundly defeated the Habsburg knights, was one of the important battles of the early 14th century that signified the end of knightly superiority. The rise of Switzerland can be interpreted as a counterpart of the peasant revolts of the Late Middle Ages, except that the Swiss were entirely successful and managed to turn their resistance into the creation of a new society.⁴⁹ It is somewhat ironic that the attempt of the Austrian Habsburgs to strengthen their authority in Switzerland and the resistance this provoked were in fact two sides of the same coin. Both reflected the dwindling power of the aristocracy, which was replaced, on one hand, by the growing power of central government and, on the other, by that of the lower classes. The success of the Swiss probably came partly due to the fact that the state, as exemplified in the Duchy of Austria, was still not very powerful at the beginning of the 14th century. Subsequent peasant actions would not prove as successful.

From the 13th century onwards, peasants and other commoners became increasingly independent of the nobility's economic and political power, which created a new sense of community among them and a new way of independently organizing their local communities. This has been described as *communalism* and was characterized, among other things, by its local roots, an egalitarian ethos, decisions made by an assembly of all free men, the idea that the ruler could lose legitimacy if he broke the 'contract' with his subjects, and the idea that a law should not be enforced unless those affected by it had unanimously agreed to it.⁵⁰ The ideas of the communalistic order bear a striking resemblance to the social organization of expanding barbarians, for example the Germanic peoples, with their *things* or assemblies. This is no coincidence, since both were created by the same type of transference of power to the common farmers or peasants and represented what they found to be an ideal social organization when left to their own devices.

Even more important than the peasant revolts themselves were the slow but steady improvements in peasant rights experienced throughout most of Western Europe. From the 13th century onwards, landlords found themselves increasingly unable to use coercive means to secure income and submission from their peasants. Whether serfs or free men, the peasants expanded their right to govern themselves and to inherit their copyholds, and improved their economy by effectively lowering rents and reducing work duties.⁵¹ In fact, peasants managed to wrestle significant proprietary rights to their lands from the landlords even to the point of being able to sell their copyholds. At the same time the landlords' income from peasant tenancies plummeted through inflation, the effects of the Black Death and peasant resistance. Such lands could become all but worthless to them and some resorted to buying copyholds back from the peasants in order to rationalize the management of their estates.⁵² These changes amount to a massive transference of property rights from the aristocracy to the peasantry and signify a temporary rise in egalitarianism such as we encounter around expansion cycles – a clear sign that late medieval Europe was indeed on the brink of expansion (below).⁵³

The rise of the peasants was mainly confined to Western Europe. In the east, by contrast, the Late Middle Ages were a time of increased seigniorial power of landlords over their peasants. In simple terms, the peasants of the west emerged fairly successfully from the great social struggle, while in the east they lost out and gradually became unfree serfs. Several explanations have been sought to clarify this divergence between east and west, but given the fundamental

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assumption that the most important foundation of power is the ability to use force, it seems quite reasonable to attribute this to the differing level of political power of the peasantry in the east and west.⁵⁴

The popular revolts of the Late Middle Ages were successful up to a point, and in order to quell them and reduce the risk of further rebellions, the authorities in Western Europe were forced to give in to some of the popular demands. Obviously, the ability of the common people to use force to further their cause had improved in relation to that of their lords, resulting in a power-shift in favour of the peasants. It is my hypothesis that the improved ability of the people to use force was primarily a reflection of a change in the manner in which ultimate force was used in Europe; in other words, a change in warfare. Competition within the system obliged rulers to broaden their military base and muster more commoners as effective warriors, instead of relying on an exclusive warrior elite. The tactics, training and equipment of these armies could be adapted, to some extent, to suit the forces of the rebels, making them formidable opponents rather than a disorganized rabble that could be quickly and readily disposed of.

However, the rise of infantry and mass armies was not uninterrupted during the Late Middle Ages. For about a century after 1350, infantry declined markedly, at least in some theatres of war such as the conflict between England and France.⁵⁵ This setback was probably caused by the dearth in population that followed the Black Death of 1348. The common people now had much more economic leeway and few were tempted by the deadly profession of war. During this time they repeatedly showed that they could and would revolt if pressed too hard, making it dangerous for the state to force military service. In addition, the aristocracy and the authorities were very well aware of the risks of arming the common people. Christine de Pizan (c. 1365 - c. 1435) may have been a staunch spokeswoman of female worth in a male-dominated world but she had no similar regard for the common people, declaring that there is "no greater folly for a prince, who wishes to hold his lordship freely and in peace, than to give the common people permission to arm themselves."⁵⁶

The rise of popular power, as shown in the peasant revolts, was matched and eventually cancelled out by the rise of the state. The growing power of the state in the Late Middle Ages reflects the increasing competition between states of this period and their growing need for more effective military solutions. Only those states that managed to produce large, efficient armies could survive, and this depended mostly on revenue derived ultimately from the agrarian class. To a considerable extent, the state supplanted the old

aristocracy as the main receiver of dues from the peasantry in the form of tolls and taxes instead of rents.⁵⁷ While the rise of the state is a subject for the next chapter, it is important to note here that it was only this rise in state power that foiled the peasants in their risings. The aristocracy, who had the most to lose if the peasants were successful, flocked to the support of the state as the only institution that could guarantee their interests in relation to those of the peasants, even at the cost of some of their power and income.⁵⁸ As it happened, the state had identical interests in this matter since it needed taxes, rents, tolls and dues – all the things the peasants wanted to get rid of – to enable it to fight wars and defend itself.

By reducing the economic pressures felt by the peasants, the plague may have provided the ruling powers with a respite from popular power, which they put to good use. When population recovery and systemic competition once again demanded larger infantry armies in the latter half of the 15th century, it was followed by a new surge of popular unrest. This time, however, state power had grown so strong – and continued to grow throughout these troubles – that it was able to quell all rebellions, despite the continued development of mass armies. It was this necessity, along with the ongoing systemic competition, that created the modern state in the 16th century. This conflict between commoners and the authorities also had much to do with the religious upheaval that destroyed Christian unity.

In the early 16th century the religious renewal of the Reformation arose in Central Europe. Undoubtedly, this movement was partly linked with the rise of communalism as local communities sought greater control over local religious practices. The *communal reformation* was an increasingly radical movement that progressed from asking for a say in who should be the local priest to questioning all earthly authority, be it of church or state, and demanding that it should all be subject to ‘gospel’. The gospel of course was the ‘word of God’ as written in the Bible and interpreted by the commoners themselves rather than church. This allowed them to use it to criticize their social superiors. The communal reformation not only played a crucial role in spreading new religious ideas but also in igniting the Peasant’s War of 1525 in Germany.⁵⁹ This split the reformation movement as none of the new theologians, Martin Luther included, “failed to take a stance against the common man.”⁶⁰ Instead, they urged the heads of the rising states to show no mercy in putting down the revolt. As a result, the Reformation was split between the people’s reformation, which was ruthlessly crushed (although it survived in a way in the religious sects of the Anabaptists) and the reformation of the princes, which proved quite successful after putting down the

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revolt. The clash between the two sides of the Reformation reflects precisely how the power of the old aristocracy had been transposed to the two opposing sides of state and people, and the state emerged victorious as it routed the peasants.

It is surely no coincidence that the setting of the communal reformation and the Peasant's War of 1525 was mostly the southerly parts of Germany, largely the same region that had seen the development of the *Landsknecht* infantry since the late 15th century. The Landsknechts were a direct response to the effective infantry of the Swiss who had been increasingly used as mercenaries from the mid 15th century, and were based on similar principles of massed formations and on mobilising commoners in warfare.⁶¹ Although their service was often mercenary, the Landsknechts should be expected to have bolstered the confidence of commoners and have made available military training and equipment that could be used to underscore popular power. In my view, this played a crucial part in the rise of communalism, the Peasant's War and indeed the Reformation itself.

It appears as if the development of mass armies almost managed to ignite an expansion cycle in the Late Middle Ages. The Swiss were certainly not far from instigating a chain reaction spreading militarization and democratization around Europe. As it happened, the states surrounding Switzerland managed to contain the free Swiss peasants, even if they scored some spectacular military successes and became much sought-after as mercenaries (hence the famous Swiss Guard of the Pope in Rome). However, one cannot help but feel that chance also had something to do with it, since the plague of the 14th century and its subsequent recurring outbreaks relieved population pressure and made it much easier for European peasants to obtain land for cultivation. Using force to acquire it didn't seem all that necessary. The Swiss did go through militarization and democratization processes but, perhaps because of the plague, there was little expansion and the Swiss experiment was kept in check.

The plague also gave the authorities breathing space to build stronger states and ready themselves against the next onslaught of popular power. At the very end of the medieval period, Swiss mercenaries again caused a chain reaction in Central Europe involving the Landsknechts, the communal reformation and the Peasant's War of 1525. This time, however, the rising states were ready and managed to nip the expansion cycle in the bud – or rather to delay it for another three centuries.

Towards Europe

As the European system emerged around 1000 AD it was the largest competitive system the world had seen, at least in the West, and the local systems that existed within Europe at the time reflect this. They were only possible during the formative period, because the system was not very cohesive to begin with and only gradually asserted itself. As the Middle Ages drew to a close it became apparent that local systems, such as the Italian one, were no longer viable and had to merge into Europe.

By the 11th century AD, historical and geographical chance had created a group of states in Europe with a similar culture and social structure that could not help competing with each other. Through this competition, they were constantly forced to copy each other's innovations in order to stay viable in a world of wars and conflict. Therefore, it was not just a common cultural heritage that made them alike but also their continued interaction. In the world of modern capitalism, a company constantly monitors its opposition and blatantly imitates solutions that make it more competitive. In this way, companies tend to become all alike because they all must apply the best solutions available at each time. This applies not only to company structures but also to their products and services. None of the great motor manufacturers still produce cars as they were made 50 or 80 years ago. If they did, they would have gone bankrupt long ago.

Exactly the same principle applies to the states of the Middle Ages. As one kingdom adopted knightly warfare, its neighbours found themselves forced to follow suit. If they didn't, they faced the fate of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of England that fell to the Norman knights in 1066. As the Norman conquerors introduced knighthood to England, its northern neighbour, Scotland, was compelled to do the same, not through foreign conquest but by voluntarily importing knights from the continent, many of them Normans or Flemings.⁶² The same or similar processes were repeated as knighthood spread itself over Eastern and Northern Europe. The local polities either adopted it voluntarily as was the case, for example, in Poland and Denmark, or had it forced upon them by foreign conquerors, as happened in some of the German expansion to the east and the conquest of the Baltic by the crusading orders of knights.⁶³ Everywhere knighthood was adopted, it increased stratification and elitization, helping to synchronize social developments all over Europe. However, although knighthood was important, it was only one of several elements that more or less served the same purpose of

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enhancing competitiveness, as well as bringing Europe together. Others, such as the development of infantry and a stronger state, were equally vital as was diplomacy, essential for making alliances and dividing enemies –activities that could prove crucial to survival. Diplomacy even helped to spread cultural homogeneity, as it is much easier to form an alliance with a kingdom or a culture with which you have something in common. This certainly played a part in the spread of decisive cultural elements such as Christianity. In medieval Europe, not being a Christian could be very dangerous indeed.

The development of European polities converged through continual interaction, and in this way Europe made itself. The competitive system was created through intensified contest between European polities that drew them closer together, made them more similar and stimulated the formation of a homogenized culture and an intense, system-wide interaction.⁶⁴ This, in turn, reinforced the competition within the system and would eventually lead to the emergence of system-wide controversies and alliances, just as had happened in ancient Greece. However, such large-scale polarization would not appear until the early modern period (next chapter). In the meantime, the European system was gradually developing towards the increased cohesion and competition that are the hallmarks of competitive systems.

Even if the European system was not very interconnected to begin with, its cohesiveness was constantly growing during the medieval period and it certainly produced some striking innovations that demonstrated its vitality and dynamism. One of these was chivalry that, although originally developed in the local French system, could not have spread so easily throughout Europe had it had not constituted a competitive system. After all, it failed to spread outside the system at all, for example to the Muslim world, in spite of repeated contact and numerous conflicts. Another innovation was the combination of northern and Mediterranean traditions of sailing and navigation beginning in the High Middle Ages that gradually produced a much superior sailing ship. The Iberian caravels and carracks, used in the Age of Exploration, were the culmination of this medieval tradition of shipbuilding.

Firearms are another example. Although gunpowder was probably invented in China, it was Europe that quickly took the lead in developing guns, already producing cannons in the early 14th century and perfecting handguns and mobile artillery by the end of the 15th. This was not because the Europeans were any smarter than the Chinese, but simply because they had a greater need and incentives to develop more effective weapons. Unlike the Chinese, they were living

in an environment where the survival of any of the numerous polities continually depended on their ability to defend themselves against opponents of similar strength. Europe at this time was a competitive system whereas China was not, and it therefore had a much greater need to hone its skills of survival.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Europe developed stronger states during the Late Middle Ages, although they did not reach their culmination until the advent of *nation states* in the 16th century. The strengthening of states is all the more remarkable given their poor condition in the Early Middle Ages. From the 11th to the 16th centuries, the typical European state grew from being among the weakest and loosest of these organizations in the world to being the strongest. This only happened because strengthening the state became a survival trait in medieval Europe. Only well-organized states equipped with sophisticated fiscal policies and effective means of fighting wars, as well as the ability to subdue their own populations, were able to survive in the increasingly competitive conditions of medieval Europe.

¹ The term 'Dark Ages' is now considered misleading and rarely used by scholars, at least in the European case. The Greek period is usually (but not always) used in the singular ('Dark Age').

² Duby (1974), pp. 12-13. McNeill (1979), pp. 119-123. Mitchell (2007), pp. 372-377.

³ Contamine (1986), p. 46.

⁴ Schuerl (1978), p. 7.

⁵ For an excellent discussion on the medieval consolidation and expansion of Europe, see Bartlett (1994).

⁶ For a good account of the Baltic Crusades and related matters, see Christiansen (1997).

⁷ Bartlett (1994), pp. 252.

⁸ See Bartlett (1994), 260-262.

⁹ Bartlett (1994) pp. 21-22. A graphic example of such views can be found in Gerald of Wales' description of Ireland (*Topographia Hibernica*, especially 93, 98-103).

¹⁰ Waley (1988), pp. 8-10, 32-34, 90-93.

¹¹ Waley (1988), pp. 69-70, 83, 118. Griffiths (1981), pp. 78-79.

¹² The analogy is from biology, where mutualism is a form of symbiotic relationship between different life forms by which both parties benefit. The term *symbiosis* or *symbiotic relationship* is sometimes used in the same sense but can actually also refer to, for example, parasitism.

¹³ Waley (1988), pp. 153 (fig. 7).

¹⁴ Waley (1988), pp. 101-116.

¹⁵ Hay (1977), p. 98.

¹⁶ Waley (1988), pp. 40-45. Chamoux (2003), p. 202. Ma (2003).

¹⁷ Verbruggen (1997), pp. 144-147.

¹⁸ Griffiths (1981), p. 82.

¹⁹ Waley (1988), pp. 131-143.

²⁰ See Waley (1988), pp. 162-172.

²¹ Waley (1988), pp. 97-101.

²² Corvini (2000), pp. 27-36. See also McNeill (1984), p. 79.

²³ See also Tilly (1992), p. 78.

²⁴ As has been pointed out by McNeill (1984), p. 125.

²⁵ Verbruggen (1997), p. 112.

²⁶ This at least is the traditional view. Some recent research indicates that these technological improvements were not all that important and the use of knights was not much different from earlier forms of cavalry. Engström (1997), pp. 253-254.

²⁷ For an excellent general discussion of medieval knightly warfare, see Verbruggen (1997), pp. 19-110.

²⁸ Verbruggen (1997), pp. 162-163.

²⁹ Contamine (1986), pp. 98-99.

³⁰ Although this was also a way to raise money instead of actual service. Contamine (1986), pp. 85-90.

³¹ Verbruggen (1997), pp. 151-153.

³² Verbruggen (1997), p. 111, 147-148.

³³ Even if they enjoyed little or no numerical superiority, according to DeVries (1996), pp. 191-197 and *passim*. However, this claim is very uncertain, see Verbruggen (1997, pp. 5-9, 168-169), who maintains that it was precisely the numerical superiority of the footsoldiers that was “in large measure responsible for their notable victories” (p. 6). For footsoldiers’ tactics, see Verbruggen (1997), pp. 182-189.

³⁴ Cf. Verbruggen (1997), pp. 112-124; Delbrück (1990, III), pp. 545-547, 585-587.

³⁵ Verbruggen (1997), pp. 179-180.

³⁶ Verbruggen (1997), pp. 117-121. Initially, most of these bowmen came from Wales.

³⁷ Cf. Hilton (2003), 157-158.

³⁸ See Verbruggen (1997), pp. 181-182.

³⁹ A point made by Brenner (1985b), pp. 258-261.

⁴⁰ Bartlett (1994) provides an excellent account of this expansion.

⁴¹ Plentiful land thus allowed *preventive checks* on population to be lifted. Cf. Herlihy (1985), pp. 142-145.

⁴² The traditional explanation of this population growth is that improvements in agriculture, such as better crop rotation and the use of the true plough, allowed it. This is a Malthusian approach, which in the light of Boserup’s theory (see pp. 72-74) doesn’t seem to make much sense. These new agricultural technologies of the High Middle Ages had two things in common: they certainly made better use of the land, so that it could feed more people, but at the same time people had to work harder for a living. In other words, as the productivity of land went up, the productivity of labour was going down. Crop rotation and the plough represent an intensification of agriculture, replacing more extensive forms which required less labour.

People will not normally increase their workload unless they have to and it benefits them directly. Therefore, explaining a rise in population in terms of people putting more effort into their agriculture, – by working harder than they had to – seems to be starting at the wrong end. As Chayanov (1986, first published 1925) showed long ago, peasant households are not capitalist enterprises out to make money. Rather, they are primarily social units and their chief purpose can probably best be described as social reproduction. This means that the behaviour of peasant households cannot be explained simply and solely through the economic laws we know from modern capitalist economies.

⁴³ A common interpretation of this *crisis of feudalism* is Malthusian; there simply wasn't room for more people, given the technological level of medieval society. However, this view has been severely criticized e.g. by Hilton (1985): "...it is clear that the crisis of feudalism was already beginning before the arrival of the bubonic plague, even before the great famines of the second decade of the fourteenth century. The point is, of course, that the crisis of feudalism as a social order was not a crisis of subsistence or a crisis caused by the scissors effect of rising industrial and falling agricultural prices. However important these features of the situation might be – and there can be no disguising their significance – the central feature was a crisis of relationships between the two main classes of feudal society, which had begun before the demographic collapse and continued, even if in somewhat altered forms, during and after it." (pp. 131-132).

The military changes and the power shift that occurred at precisely the same time as the population slump suggest another possibility that, as the authority of the aristocracy waned, peasant householders took more control of their local communities and, for their own benefit, introduced greater restrictions on division of lands and on marriages and procreation, thus slowing population growth at the same time as they ensured a decent quality of life for themselves (cf. Jones 1981, pp. 12-16). If this is true, the population slump of the early 14th century has little to do with famine, limited resources or hitting a ceiling on productivity. Rather, it was simply the cessation of unusually rapid population growth brought about by an unusually powerful landed elite.

⁴⁴ But others were not. One of the greater peasant revolts was that which ravaged Flanders between 1323 and 1328 – two decades before the plague struck. See TeBrake (1993).

⁴⁵ For the latter, see especially Hilton (2003), pp. 152-156.

⁴⁶ E.g. Mate (1992). The original ringleaders of the Peasants' War of 1525 in Upper Swabia seem to have been the moderate peasant 'elite', although radicalization quickly followed (Sreenivasan 2001). See also Hilton (2003), pp. 116-117, 160-164, 176-185.

⁴⁷ Katajala (2004a), pp. 39-41.

⁴⁸ Brenner (1985a), pp. 48, 54-55.

⁴⁹ See also McNeill (1984), pp. 136-137; Verbruggen (1997), pp. 112-115; Delbrück (1990, III), pp. 585-592. Although ultimately destroyed in 1559, the

'peasant republic' of Dithmarschen was initially just as successful. See Verbruggen (1997), pp. 115-117.

⁵⁰ Blickle (1998), pp. 1-15. Johansson (2004), p. 81-82. See also Blickle (1997).

⁵¹ Brenner (1985b), pp. 242-246. Sreenivasan (2001), pp. 45-52.

⁵² Hilton (1985), p. 128-132. Brenner (1985a), p. 59.

⁵³ Brenner (1985b, p. 252) makes the point emphatically for France, which he contrasts with contemporary England: "By the early fourteenth century, the peasants of northern France *had achieved effectively full property rights to the customary land* (fixed, minimal dues and the right to inherit)" [original emphasis]. See also Blickle (1992), p. 174.

⁵⁴ Brenner (1985a), pp 34-46 and (1985b), pp. 275-283. I agree with Brenner that the changes in peasant status are better explained through political processes than economic ones. Brenner derives the political weakness of eastern peasants from settlements being created by colonization under seigniorial leadership, resulting in much less communal solidarity and organization (criticized by Wunder, 1985). I am not convinced, however, and would like to suggest that political competition in the less densely populated east was less intense than in the west. Therefore, the development of mass armies was not as pronounced, diminishing the political power of the common people and tipping the scales in favour of the landlords. The rising power of the state (below) then served to cement the existing social order and increased servitude in step with its own power.

It is perhaps also significant that when the plague finally reached Iceland in 1402, the peasants only improved their economic status (e.g. lower rents), but their proprietary or legal rights did not improve as they did in much of the rest of Western Europe. On the contrary, property was never more concentrated than during the 15th century. At this time, Iceland was out of sync with military developments in Western Europe since local popular warfare had disappeared in the 13th century and the Late Middle Ages were characterized by small bands of elite warriors (chapter 7). Consequently, the peasants had little political clout and could not enforce their demands against the aristocracy, even if they benefitted from the overabundance of land as the population plummeted. The effects of the plague were enough to improve the peasant economy but not their rights – for this, political power was required and depended ultimately on the military situation.

⁵⁵ Contamine (1986), pp. 132-133.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Contamine (1985), p. 156.

⁵⁷ Brenner (1985a), pp. 56-58. Bois (1985), p. 111.

⁵⁸ Although the king and the peasants occasionally found themselves on the same side, fighting the aristocracy in conflicts between crown and nobility over diminishing resources, such as occurred in 15th century Spain (Hilton, 2003, p. 118).

⁵⁹ Blickle (1992), especially pp. 11-53 and 88-108.

⁶⁰ Blickle (1992), p. 199.

⁶¹ Contamine (1986), pp. 135-137. Delbrück (1990, III), pp. 592-593.

⁶² Bartlett (1994), pp. 53-54, 78-83.

⁶³ Some isolated places like Iceland apparently did not adopt knightly warfare, and it seems that this was simply because they didn't have to. Because of its remote location, Iceland was not really threatened by England, Scotland or even Norway, at least not in a military sense. As Iceland became a Norwegian dependency, so reducing internal competition, the popular armies were replaced by elite warriors (chapter 7). But the local elite could do without the arduous and costly practice of chivalry because there were no foreign knights knocking on the door and forcing them to respond.

⁶⁴ See also Tilly (1992), p. 32 and *passim*.

9. THE EUROPEAN SYSTEM IN THE MODERN PERIOD

Most books that take a long view of history tend to get more detailed as they approach our own times. This probably reflects the belief that a primary goal of historical study should be to explain the world we now live in and that recent times are most relevant to this task. I don't agree. From my point of view, which is certainly different from that of most historians, our discipline is primarily about discovering and expounding the *general laws* that govern the evolution of human societies. This can be accomplished by studying several different cases that expose these laws. The importance of each case is not determined by its proximity to the modern world but rather how much it can tell us about the general laws we are investigating. Of course, these laws can then be used to explain and illuminate individual cases, but the crucial task is to arrive at general truths rather than specific information about Greeks, Germans or Vikings.

All examples of competitive systems and expansion cycles are equally relevant to the mission of clarifying these phenomena. From this point of view, modernity deserves no special consideration and should even be used cautiously as the huge changes of the last two centuries or so can easily distort our conception of what the modern European system and its expansion cycle had in common with earlier occurrences.

Nevertheless, modern Europe provides us with a fine example of a competitive system that underwent an expansion cycle, an example that is better known than previous ones, although industrialization and other changes happening at the same time tend to muddy the waters. Even the idiosyncrasies of this system and its expansion and the way in which it interacted with industrialization are sometimes quite illuminating.

However, it is not my purpose to explain modernity or how and why Europe and European-derived societies came to industrialize and dominate the world. The competitive system certainly goes a long way towards explaining why European society became so dynamic. At the same time, it maintained a remarkable level of stability in spite of near constant warfare. But this does not, by itself, explain why the system developed towards industrialization and world domination. Many scholars have considered this problem and some, such as Robert Wesson, E.L. Jones and Charles Tilly, have come up with ideas that

are based on, or at least compatible with, a competitive system model.¹

In this chapter I shall not offer a new explanation for the rise of Europe but rather – and very briefly – highlight some interesting aspects of European development that draw forth its nature as a competitive system, while taking a glance at those parts of modernization that can be identified as an expansion cycle, albeit a rather unusual one.

Intensified Competition

By the end of the Middle Ages the European system was becoming a truly effective competitive system. Local subsystems were either gone or disappearing fast, and war, instead of being more or less a private affair, was being monopolized by states with growing organizational abilities. The emergence of more powerful states meant more intense competition between them. Trade was also becoming more important, binding the countries of Europe into a closer network, but was also vital for state revenues as it was easily taxed and controlled and therefore generated income out of all proportion to its general economic significance.² Increased competition necessitated more sophisticated foreign policy in which all competitors, friend and foe alike, kept a close eye on each other in order to gain the maximum possible advantage from every situation. From the 16th century on, diplomatic relations became formalised and permanent embassies were established, indicating closer competition.³ Competition between states was reflected in state finances, as the more prosperous ones had greater funds to spend on navies and armies, which could consume up to 90% of all public spending.⁴ These funds depended ultimately on a healthy economy increasingly nurtured by the state, which thereby evolved from being something of a parasite into having a mutualistic relationship with its economic base that was beneficial to both. As a result, competition between states certainly had a profound influence on economic development and probably played an important part in the emergence of industrialization and modern economies.⁵

Intensified competition was largely a reflection of growing state power but this has to be considered in the light of the changes in warfare that became especially marked as the Middle Ages gave way to the early modern period around 1500 AD. At this time, handheld firearms or muskets were coming into their own and were increasingly to dominate the battlefields of the ensuing centuries. In

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the first half of the early modern period, musketeers were accompanied by pikemen and archers and together they ensured the demise of medieval heavy cavalry as a major instrument of war. Of course, cavalry did not disappear but reverted to the role it had played in classical antiquity, that of supporting the main force of the infantry. Heavy plate armour was replaced with much lighter equipment or even no armour at all as it impeded mobility and proved of little worth against firearms. As a result, the ties binding the social elite to cavalry warfare were severed once and for all, as cavalymen simply became paid soldiers of various social backgrounds. Armies were also becoming much larger. In the Middle Ages, a force of 10,000 men was considered large, even exceptionally so, and many wars were fought with much smaller forces. In the early modern period, field armies frequently included tens of thousands of soldiers and the entire armed forces commanded by a single monarch could number hundreds of thousands, such as the French army around 1700 which is estimated at close to 400,000 men.⁶

At the same time, mobile artillery, besides having an impact on the battlefield, transformed siege warfare, rendering medieval castles useless. To counter the effects of siege artillery, new kinds of defences had to be constructed with lower but much thicker walls, studded with their own defensive artillery and designed to give it the most advantageous angles of fire. This new system of defence, the *trace italienne*, began to pop up in European cities and fortresses in the 16th century but was far too expensive to adorn the residences of individual aristocrats.⁷

The changes in warfare of the 16th century are often collectively called the *military revolution* and it was closely associated with the rise of the state at the same time. Because of them, wars were becoming hugely expensive.⁸ While this new method of fighting was instigated by new and stronger governments, it also necessitated such governments if states were to hold their own amid the growing bellicosity of Europe. As so often happens, war served as a vehicle of synchronization within a competitive system, forcing participants to choose between oblivion or making the changes necessary for survival.

As mentioned earlier, developments in warfare from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period, not only represent the rise of the state but also the closely related general shift from elite to mass warfare. Rather than small bands of highly trained and excellently equipped elite warriors, we now find large armies of merely adequately equipped soldiers of no special social standing. Indeed, they were often regarded as the scum of the earth. These developments by themselves did not constitute transference of power

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to the common people, but they made such a change possible by generating tactics and equipment appropriate to the needs of popular armies if they were to rise in revolt. Such armies would then inevitably bring power to the people, but the formidable opposition of the modern state had first to be overcome.

The decline of elite warfare signified a shift in power away from the old elite, the medieval nobility, and the beneficiaries were the lower classes, as demonstrated in the peasant revolts of the Late Middle Ages. At the same time, only the state in its role as a concentration of centralized power was capable of containing the potential of popular lower-class armies. Where the peasants or the 'people' achieved some success, such as in Switzerland and some of the Italian states, the resulting political units were too small to really threaten the larger centralized states. The aristocrats had no choice but to support the state that still guarded their interests, even at the cost of losing of their local autonomy. The catastrophic population drop caused by the Black Death of 1348 and subsequent outbreaks of plague, also did much to relieve population pressure and improve the economic position of the peasants, thereby making it easier for them to accept the existing power structure.

Still, one of the first acts of the stronger state was to disarm its own population, especially in the 16th century.⁹ It simply could not risk leaving the means to challenge the state in the hands of the people, and this was the origin of the state's claim to a monopoly of the use of force. Only the state was allowed to use force to make a point – individuals were not supposed to take the law into their own hands, but should refer their problems to the proper authorities. This also necessitated an increased level of efficiency on the part of the state, since it was the sole body charged with the task of upholding the rule of law. Forbidden from doing so themselves, subjects had to be able to rely on the state to act for them. By and large, the early modern state rose to the occasion, not only disarming the general population but also greatly increasing the efficiency and even the level of justice provided by the courts of law. This is the nature of the state as defined by Max Weber in terms of the monopoly of legitimate use of force (above p. 26).

The modern state (as defined by Weber) thus came into existence as a kind of side effect to the disarming of the general population, carried out by the state for its own protection. If subjects were not allowed to bear arms, they could not be expected to defend themselves against robbers, rebels or even invasions, and the state had to be able to assume the task on their behalf. However, the problem here was that the state required armed forces to perform these tasks, forces

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that were not a part of the general population. Initially, most states resorted to mercenary forces, but gradually also developed standing armies, a phenomenon mostly unknown in the Middle Ages. As mercenaries were often foreigners, many heads of state preferred them as soldiers to their own subjects because they could be used more readily against the indigenous population, thus safeguarding the power of the state.¹⁰ Of course, standing armies and mercenaries cost money, and the procurement of these funds became a prime concern of the state, particularly as the cost of war was rising dramatically.

To a very significant extent, competition in early modern Europe favoured those states that achieved an effective symbiosis between state and economy. A positive feedback loop appeared by which the state protected and encouraged trade, reaping its rewards in tolls and taxes. The resultant income further strengthened the state, thereby making it even more effective at stimulating its economy. In essence this change in relationship was quite similar to the invention of agriculture, when the hunter-turned-farmer no longer simply took from nature, but formed a mutualistic relationship with other species such as wheat, barley, sheep and goats. Biologically speaking, this relationship was beneficial to both parties and enhanced their common competitiveness against all others, with the result that these species have become fairly dominant in the earth's biosphere. In early modern Europe, the state, in a sense, ceased using its economic base like a forager – taking without giving back – and became a farmer that cultivated its economy. States such as the Netherlands and England that excelled at this new relationship reaped huge benefits and became powerful far beyond their size and population.

Frontier Empires: The Benefits of Size

The size of polities always affects the way in which they compete. Above, we have been discussing how certain effective solutions or structures could enhance the competitiveness of certain polities and how these were then usually copied by others within the system. This works very well if all states are of similar size, but of course they usually are not. In early modern Europe we find autonomous political units whose populations ranged from a few tens of thousands to tens of millions, and competition between the largest and the smallest would obviously be very unequal no matter how they were structured. Competition isn't really effective unless the competing agents (states or polities) are of comparable size. However, smaller states can

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compete if they are sheltered to some extent from the full force of competition, either by geography, such as the Scandinavian states, or by forming alliances of one kind or another. In fact, most smaller states in the European system used this strategy to survive – if a great power threatened them they were quick to seek the assistance of another great power which would normally be all too eager to ‘help’ since the greater states were usually at each other’s throats. On the other hand, the largest states enjoyed the benefits of size.

In time, Russia became the largest state in Europe and its rise to great power began under the energetic leadership of Czar Peter the Great (1696-1725). At the beginning of the modern period, Russia and Poland were of about equal size in terms of population. At first Poland was considerably stronger in political terms but as the age progressed, the tables turned. While Russia went from strength to strength, Poland disintegrated, to eventually completely disappear as a political unit in the late 18th century. The rise of Russia continued into the 20th century, when it became a world power in the guise of the Soviet Union.

Russia was a frontier empire to the European system and as such shared many characteristics with previous ones, such as Macedonia with regard to Greece and Rome to the Etruscan and perhaps the Hellenistic systems. The Russian Empire grew up on the outskirts of Europe, exposed to formidable external enemies in the form of the steppe peoples such as the Mongols, thereby providing a buffer for the rest of Europe. Because of its position, Russia did not fully share in all the benefits of European civilization and social development. Cities and trade were less prominent than in the west, and the social structure looked primitive and medieval to western eyes. But Russia did have one very important advantage; it had plenty of room to expand, principally towards the east. Following centuries of depredations by Mongols and other steppe nomads, the Russians, under Ivan the Terrible, were finally able to get the better of their enemies in the middle of the 16th century, partly at least by using the levelling effect of firearms to cancel out the nomads’ traditional military superiority.¹¹ A century later, they had already reached the Pacific Ocean and had begun to subjugate the vast expanses of Siberia and Central Asia.

As Russia had been very sparsely populated, there was ample room for expansion, especially in the new territories to the southeast and east. Around 1600, the Russian Empire contained only 10 million inhabitants compared to 16 million in France, the largest kingdom in Europe. In 1750 these numbers were 18 and 22 million respectively and by 1950, the USSR had a population of 180 million compared to

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France's paltry 42 million.¹² It doesn't take much thought to realize that without this population growth, Russia would never have become a world power and to a large extent owed it to its peripheral position within Europe. There was no European power to the east to contain Russia's expansion that consequently did not halt until it reached the Pacific Ocean. Situated on the margins of Europe, Russia benefited from its connection to, or at least partial inclusion in, the competitive system of Europe, acquiring from it the culture and technology that enabled it to expand unrestricted outside the system. For a long time this build-up of power outside Europe did not make itself felt within the European system. Russia was not a great power in Europe until the 18th century but from then on managed to maintain its position by its sheer size, in spite of a lagging economy. What it lacked in sophistication and infrastructure was made up for in the weight of its territories and population.

However, this was not a wholly positive situation since it allowed Russia to compete with other European powers without having to modernize its economy and society. In alliance with the absolutist state, the ruling elite could afford *not* to keep up with developments in Western Europe. Structured in the same way, a small state would either have been destroyed by competition or else forced to catch up as quickly as possible. But Russia did not have to – its size made it an effective competitor despite its inefficiencies. The same goes, to some extent, for France. As Europe's most populous state, it was much larger than any of its close neighbours and even larger than Russia in terms of population. By the mid 17th century it had become very powerful through its absolutist regime and, as a result, France's neighbours tended to unite against her, as in the War of the Spanish Succession of 1701-1714, but were still unable really to threaten the existence of the French kingdom. Even France could afford to become complacent to structural developments because of its size. In the end, this caused states like France and Russia to become vulnerable as they were lagging too far behind their chief competitors and were not able to close the gap quickly enough.

In both cases, the result was a revolution, a desperate attempt to improve the competitive situation. While the French Revolution of 1789 triggered profound changes in Europe (below), Russia could still afford to all but ignore events around it because of its size. In the 19th century, Russia fell yet further behind in the push to modernize but was suddenly forced to face difficult choices in the early 20th century, in the wake of a humiliating defeat against Japan in 1905 and a poor performance in the Great War of 1914-1918. The result was the revolution of 1917 that unleashed the real potential of Russia, in a

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manner rather similar to the way in which the French Revolution had released the true potential of France. In the modern world system, this pattern may also be applied to the Chinese revolution of 1949 and the 'democratic' revolution in Russia of 1991.¹³

It is the benefit of size that ultimately creates frontier empires. They benefit from the innovations of the competitive system but are not restricted by it in their expansion and can thus become huge powers, capable even of destroying the competitive system that spawned them.

* * *

In spite of being agriculturalists, the native inhabitants of North America were relatively thin on the ground compared to what the European settlers were used to when they appeared in the 17th century. The new arrivals also saw themselves as morally, culturally and technologically superior to the Indians and this led them to view the land as more or less unoccupied, despite the native population. As hundreds and thousands of settlers steadily pushed the frontier westwards, eliminating and assimilating the natives, there was a strong sense of unlimited opportunity. However, this perceived sense of superiority did not merely exist in the heads of the settlers since centuries of cultural and technological developments in the European competitive system had indeed served to provide them with many advantages that helped them subdue the Indians. But perhaps the most important element at work was the phenomenal growth in their population, which took off in the mid-17th century and peaked in the 18th when it more than doubled every 25 years. What is more, this was achieved mainly by reproduction rather than immigration. In a sense, the Indians were not so much conquered as swamped, but the causes of this unbridled growth are not particularly mysterious. Europeans coming to America, with its perceived unlimited supply of land there for the taking, naturally adjusted their family patterns to suit these conditions. Young men did not have to wait for their elders to die or work long years for pay to acquire the means to raise a family. People married young and did not see the need to limit the number of their children. On the contrary, in circumstances in which most men were able to acquire land, few wished to work as hired hands, and the farmers had to rely on themselves and their families (or sometimes slaves) to do the necessary work. In this situation, several children were an asset, not a liability.¹⁴

The American expansion of the 18th century looks very much like an expansion cycle. Here, we have all the usual ingredients –

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militarization, democratization and expansion. At first, the colonies were established by European states, with Great Britain quickly emerging as the dominant one. However, because of the remoteness of the colonies from their home countries, defence depended much on the colonists themselves, and the image of the frontiersman, gun always at the ready as he worked his farm, is a familiar one. This happened in America at the same time as the general population in Europe had become accustomed to not bearing arms, leaving such matters entirely to the state. Life in the colonies also tended to be more democratic and egalitarian than in the mother country, with the important exception of the southern plantations, which were worked by indentured servants and slaves. Many settlers were fleeing perceived or real religious persecution, and the authorities even promised greater liberties to encourage immigration. With the exception of the plantations, class distinctions became less pronounced than in Europe, with most European settlers eventually becoming freeholding farmers on their own land, even if they first had to work off the cost of the Atlantic crossing. In this way, all the usual elements of an expansion cycle were in place, even before the American Revolution of 1776, which rounded off the whole process.

In discussing the expansion of the Slavs and the filling up of land in Iceland (chapter 7), we have already encountered the special flavour of expansion cycles in which expansion is not produced by competition within a system but rather by the discovery of a plentiful supply of land available for the taking. This flavour I have called *colonizing expansion*, and European colonization of North America is another excellent example.

In America, European society showed what it was capable of when faced with plenty of land. The Europeans crossed the ocean armed with military tactics and technology already well-suited to a popular army, and once there, developed even further in this direction under frontier conditions. It appears that the three processes of militarization, democratization and expansion were unusually interlinked in America, although it must be emphasized that these processes always overlap strongly in any case. Militarization essentially means that the state or polity depends on the arms of the free citizenry. This was certainly the case in America from the outset and was a crucial element in defeating the Indians. Democratization then followed due to the need of the authorities to attract new settlers and ensure the defence and economic viability of the colonies, but also from the guns of the settlers themselves and the inherent egalitarianism of the frontier. Expansion, however, was part of the history of the colonies from the beginning, first with the arrival of the

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immigrants, some of whom were state-sponsored, and later as a result of their own population growth. This was the basic difference between the American expansion and the common *system expansion* emerging from the centre of competitive systems. Like other colonizing expansions, the American example was sparked not by democratization but by a perceived or real unlimited supply of land available for the taking. But even if their roots are different, the American expansion and other expansions were structurally similar, and once underway behaved in fundamentally the same way.

In a way, the American Revolution continued the tradition of the Swiss rebellion and peasant revolts of late medieval Europe. Like their forbears, the Americans had discovered the strength of their own arms and that of a popular army. While the emergence of the modern state had crushed the peasant revolts in Europe, the state in America had become dependent on its subjects to an unusual degree – even if the mother country of Great Britain was less coercive than many others. When the interests of the British state and the American colonies diverged, not least over the question of whether to continue expansion westward, the colonies rebelled and broke free. To some extent, this was a revolt against the modern state and its coercion. Let us not forget that it was the state, in concert with the aristocracy, that crushed the peasant revolts in Europe and limited the freedom of the general population. Of course, the Americans could not do completely without a state apparatus, but they went to great pains to limit its power and tried to ensure that it did not become as coercive as the one of which they had just rid themselves. Viewed in this light, the 2nd amendment of the American constitution, confirming the “right of the people to keep and bear arms”, and even the fascination of present day Americans with guns, become understandable. In Europe, the modern state had come to power by disarming its population. The Americans wanted to ensure that this didn’t happen again.

The American Revolution succeeded in overthrowing the British state in the thirteen colonies, but this revolt did not spread directly to Europe, where the state and the interests it protected were still strong. The Atlantic Ocean not only protected the Americans from the European powers but also contained the revolt on its western shores. However, changes were also brewing in Europe and the French Revolution of 1789 was not unaffected by the American one (below). In the meantime, America grew up to become a frontier empire to the European system. The Americans had plenty of room to expand, and their westward push even acquired some of the characteristics of an empire expansion similar to that of the Romans (chapter 5). Examples

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of this can be seen both in the alliance of the state and the colonizing framers and in the continuous elitization that followed in the wake of the expansion of the frontier and the accompanying re-establishment of stratified society.¹⁵

The American expansion proceeded mostly untouched by the constant competition within the European system. This separateness was directly expressed in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which clearly stated that the United States of America did not consider themselves a part of the conflict between European powers and would resist further expansion by them in the Western Hemisphere. America then grew to become a world power, a process aided by further waves of immigration as Europe spewed out its excess population during its expansion cycle of the 19th and 20th centuries (below). It is no coincidence that both of the superpowers that dominated world politics after WWII emerged as frontier empires east and west of the European system.

To some extent, colonialism can be explained by the model of frontier empires. As the European powers became proficient in exploration and long-distance trade, even such centrally placed states as France could begin building overseas empires. In acquiring colonies in America and elsewhere, France was in fact acting much like a frontier empire – expanding outside the system to gather strength that could eventually be brought to bear on the European homeland. Already placed geographically at the edge of Europe and with an actively expanding population overseas, Great Britain behaved very much like a frontier empire, at least until its American colonies broke away. In this way, the powers of Europe fully realized the potential of building frontier empires, and doing so became part of the ongoing competition within the system, thus stimulating not only the colonialism of the early modern period but also the imperialism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The difference between these colonial empires and true frontier empires lay in the fact that any state with access to the sea could theoretically become a colonial empire. Almost all the states of the Atlantic seaboard made some such attempts: Portugal, Spain, France, England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Denmark-Norway and even Sweden. Consequently, the acquisition of a colonial empire did not skew the competition within the system to the same extent as would have resulted from the formation of true frontier empires, as the latter could only form on the outskirts of the system. Nevertheless, the centre of European gravity moved to the Atlantic – to the rising colonial empires. However, unlike true frontier empires, the new possessions of the Atlantic states were distinct from their homelands

and therefore not as seamlessly integrated into their societies and economies as was the case in Russia or the United States. The new possessions of true frontier empires were far more effective in boosting their power than the colonies of the central states, which usually had uneasy relationships with the homeland and in most cases eventually broke free. As a result, the frontier empires of Russia and USA ultimately emerged as far more powerful than any of the colonial empires.

Expansion postponed

Generally speaking, early modern Europe was on the verge of an expansion cycle but was kept from the brink by the modern national state that was constantly growing in power and efficiency. System expansions are triggered by the transfer of power from the elite to the lower classes, caused by military developments. As this transfer of power was directly opposed to the interest of the ruling elite, it would try to avoid it for as long as possible. In Europe this was achieved by disarming the population, relying on mercenary armies and greatly increasing the power of the state. For about three centuries these methods were successful – so successful, in fact, that in some parts of Europe there was a strong resurgence of aristocratic power backed by the state and a corresponding weakening of the position of the peasantry. In Eastern Europe, for example, the rise of a strongly coercive state in alliance with the aristocracy resulted in a resurgence of serfdom, which lasted in Russia until 1861. By contrast, most of Western Europe escaped these excesses and the peasantry remained locally strong.

During these centuries, Europe did expand to some extent. There was some population growth, even substantial in some cases, and the European powers expanded their political domination far beyond the confines of the continent. But even if it shaded into a colonizing expansion in America, this was mostly an expansion of states and elites. In the heart of Europe, the full power of the expansion cycle was still waiting to be unleashed, but there were some stirrings that pointed the way.

The antithesis of the new serfdom that arose in Eastern Europe was to be found in the Scandinavian Peninsula, particularly Sweden. Here, serfdom had never been important and the peasantry remained free, prosperous and even politically important. In some ways this was a legacy from the Viking age that was preserved due to the late appearance of knighthood and its only partial penetration. In

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Scandinavia, especially the northerly parts, elite warfare never became as dominant as it was in most of Western Europe and much of the east. The sparse settlements of many regions also encouraged peasant autonomy, and the popular revolts of the Late Middle Ages tended to confirm and enhance peasant power. The peasant revolts in 15th century Sweden were largely joined by the aristocracy and turned into a national struggle for separation from Denmark, which was ultimately successful in the early 16th century. Consequently, the autonomous kingdom of Sweden was to some extent based on and created by peasant revolts.¹⁶ As a result, the peasants maintained a strong position in Sweden, even if they sometimes clashed violently with the king, as happened, for example, in the 'Dacke War' of 1542-43.¹⁷ This position was built into the constitution of the resurrected kingdom, which uniquely provided a special house in its diet for peasants or farmers. Therefore, they were included in the decision-making process, albeit as junior partners, and had a stake in the state not normally seen elsewhere.¹⁸

Sweden based its army mostly on its own subjects, and as it built and defended its Baltic empire an unusually high proportion of the population was under arms. Under Gustavus Adolphus (1611-1632), an effective system of conscription was introduced that managed to produce about 10,000 men for the army every year from a population of around 1.5 million. Casualties, more from disease than battle, were often so high in the Swedish army that few survived to reach an age when it was time to settle down. While this constituted a severe drain on the civilian population, it was nevertheless endured, probably due to the relatively enlightened character of the kingdom in its attitude towards the peasantry and the partial inclusion of the latter in government.¹⁹

Sweden, however, was no peasant republic but a strong modernizing state that based its military prowess not only on tactical innovations but, more importantly, on a sophisticated system of organization that succeeded in including the greater part of the population in the decision-making process in such a way that they were willing to shoulder extraordinary burdens for the defence of the realm, either as conscripts, militia or taxpayers.²⁰ Backed by such organization, the military could even be used for foreign conquests, although Sweden's participation in the Thirty Years' War in Germany also involved a large number of mercenaries.

Although Sweden managed to carve considerable territories from most of its neighbours, not everything went smoothly and by the late 17th century it was losing its edge. Internal conflicts came to the surface and in 1680 the king, Charles XI, emerged as an absolute

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ruler. His new regime curbed the power of the old higher aristocracy but garnered considerable popular support, giving it a somewhat bonapartist character. The result was a relatively small state with a powerful standing army that gave it the ability to fight against all of its formidable opponents at the same time, in the Great Northern War.²¹

Despite all this, Sweden did not produce a true popular army, and its large and effective army was only made possible because the country's system of government was fairly consensual in terms of the age in which it operated. As Sweden's opponents had to react to this, it isn't too hard to imagine an escalation in the size of military forces that would have produced true popular armies. Like Switzerland before it, Sweden seemed close to sparking a new expansion cycle in Europe, but was ultimately neither large enough nor strong enough. Given the small size of the Swedish population, the successes it achieved were remarkable. As an example, two of the Swedes' principal opponents, Poland and Russia, had a combined population about ten times as large.²² In the end, the opposition was just too strong and Sweden's rise to empire was stopped in the Great Northern war of 1700-1721, when all its traditional enemies, Russia, Poland, Saxony, Prussia and Denmark, combined to curb its ambitions.

As things turned out, Sweden's enemies did not have to mobilize their populations to the same extent as their opponent, and their combined size and strength was enough to prevent Sweden from plunging itself and Europe into a new expansion cycle. However, Sweden's reliance on its own population in war showed the way for other European powers. Conscript armies, made up of young, unattached men subject to strict discipline, were a way of building large forces without risking too much in the way of democratization. Based on Sweden's example, other European powers did this increasingly during the 18th century, a policy that would eventually backfire.

Generally speaking, the early modern period was characterized by an alliance of state and nobility designed to maintain their power in the face of the growing potential of the common people. While this alliance was generally successful for most of the period, the two parties sometimes quarrelled and even sought to align themselves with the commoners in order to gain an edge. There was also a trend towards greater inclusion as states were forced to rely increasingly on their own subjects as soldiers, merchants, artisans and taxpayers and tried to foster patriotism to cement the relationship of the common people to the state.²³ By the late 18th century, Europe was ready to

explode. The only thing missing was a trigger – a substantial member of the system willing to popularize warfare, thereby forcing everybody else to follow suit. The French Revolution provided the trigger, but it was to be a very unusual expansion cycle.

The Modern Expansion Cycle

I usually don't pay much attention to recent history. What interests me most are agrarian societies, which are considerably more diverse than either industrial ones or those of hunter-gatherers, and also make up the bulk of documented history. In going beyond the Industrial and French Revolutions, I cannot help feeling a little out of my depth. Nevertheless, I consider it necessary to put recent developments or *modernization* into the context of expansion cycles since they share some obvious characteristics. As a result, the following discussion is neither detailed nor profound, but is aimed at pointing out the ways in which some aspects of modernization should be interpreted as constituting a modern expansion cycle.

The concept of modernization usually includes several changes that have occurred over the past couple of centuries. Among others, these include population growth, democratization and industrialization. It is usually assumed that these processes were somehow interconnected, that they form a kind of modernization package that societies could either embrace wholesale or reject entirely. Since many of the processes associated with modernization have previously occurred during expansion cycles and all the expected processes of expansion cycles in fact occurred during modernization, it is clear that modernization *includes* an expansion cycle. However, previous expansion cycles obviously did not include industrialization, and it therefore seems most logical to conclude that the modern expansion cycle and modern industrialization are in fact two separate phenomena. Although they both occurred at the same time in Europe and affected each other in various ways, this does not mean that such phenomena must *necessarily* go together. They could probably occur independently, and expansion cycles have, of course, repeatedly taken place without industrialization. Whether this works both ways, however, whether industrialization could *in principle* take place without an expansion cycle, is more uncertain.

There really is only one instance of industrialization occurring independently in world history – that of Britain. Even in that case it did, broadly speaking, coincide with an expansion cycle, and it would therefore be difficult to prove that it could have happened without

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one. However, as both phenomena were probably stimulated by the European competitive system, the fact that they both happened at more or at less the same time may be no more than a coincidence. Expansion cycles certainly do not need industrialisation, and there doesn't seem to be any pressing reason why industrialization would need an expansion cycle in order to emerge. In fact, industrialization began in Britain during the 18th century before the revolutions in America and France, and therefore appears to precede the start of the European expansion cycle. While it is true that the British system of government did contain a powerful elected parliament, the electorate included only a small fraction of the adult male population and was anything but democratic. As a result, the British parliament of the time was rather the political instrument of the propertied upper classes, even if it provided some blueprints for the later development of truly democratic institutions. Therefore, it can hardly be regarded as symptomatic of a democratization process. By contrast, it was France, a country without significant industrialization, that triggered democratization in Europe and thus launched the expansion cycle.

The primary process of system expansion cycles is militarization, by which is meant the creation of popular armies – the people under arms. As we have seen, militarization depends on the development of the methods of mass warfare as opposed to elite warfare, making it possible to effectively utilize large numbers of relatively unprofessional warriors or soldiers. Such armies necessarily command political power, and military developments of this kind are usually brought about by intense competition between polities that are forced constantly to seek new ways of increasing their military power. By the 17th and 18th centuries, most European powers had moved away from strictly mercenary armies and created standing armies recruited mostly from their own subjects. As the internal power of the state grew and the disarmed civilian population became compliant – and complacent – to this situation, it was generally felt that it was better to recruit soldiers at home. They were usually more reliable and sometimes even motivated by patriotism, which was also growing. Nor did the state have to pay them as much as a rapidly assembled mercenary force that had to cover its own expenses.²⁴

As competition required standing armies, these naturally became national forces, even if they sometimes originated as mercenaries in prolonged employment. By the 17th century, France had acquired a large standing army that after 1675 was typically around 200,000 strong.²⁵ Even the English, long opposed to such concentration of force in the hands of the monarch, moved towards a permanent standing army after the Civil War (1642-1651), although they did depend more

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on their ships for the defence of their homeland and by the 18th century had become the world's leading naval power. These were the two greatest opponents in Europe during the 18th century: the rising power of rich, industrializing England confronted by the might of Europe's strongest kingdom of old.

England was getting ready for industrialization at the same time as trade and economic development were making her the richest nation in Europe. Her population was growing fast, not least because economic diversification was allowing more people to start families and eke out a meagre existence as wage earners rather than peasants.²⁶ Some expansion cycles are triggered by the appearance of unlimited land for colonization i.e. *colonizing expansion*, as happened in America. It is an intriguing question as to whether industrialization could, on its own, produce a type of expansion cycle similar to colonizing expansion. The main difference would be that new opportunities would be provided not by new land but by new employment in industry and services. However, unlike plentiful land, employment did not make people economically independent or otherwise enhance their political power and it is therefore difficult to see how it could foster democratization, a necessary ingredient in any true expansion cycle. Nevertheless, industrialization in England and eventually Europe provided massive employment and allowed much of the resultant population growth to be retained in its homelands.

Although industrialization began in England, the concurrent expansion cycle began in France. Both of these states were expanding outside Europe during the 18th century and drawing strength from their colonies. England had become an economic powerhouse and was slowly gaining the upper hand in the costly conflict between the two countries. The colonial war of 1754-63, the counterpart of the Seven Years' War in Europe (1756-63), deprived France of most of her possessions in North America which effectively became British. The subsequent loss of the most valuable British colonies in the American Revolution of 1776 evened things up a little, but French support of the Americans cost them dearly in both money and resources. By the 1780s, it was becoming clear that France could not maintain this struggle with the wealthy British without some fundamental change. The state was effectively bankrupt and the only way out was to increase its revenue. That, however, seemed impossible without infringing on the privileges of the nobles and clergy. The absolutist regime in France was not powerful enough to do this without some sort of general consent, and so the States General was convened in 1788 with its three constituent estates: nobility, clergy and people. The third estate, the people, quickly took the lead and in 1789 it

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became the National Assembly, taking over the government of the state. From then on, the revolution became more radical through a combination of aristocratic and royal opposition and external threats. A republic was established in 1792, and the following year saw the king guillotined. Throughout all these events, the position of the army was of the greatest importance since it proved unreliable when used against the French people with whom the soldiers naturally identified. The king's use of national forces had backfired since although they proved excellent against external enemies and thus a competitive asset, they could not be used to safeguard his power from the French people.²⁷

During the French Revolution, militarization and democratization occurred simultaneously or even in reverse order to that which was most usual. The true military power of the popularized army was not released until the revolution was victorious and had to defend itself against the European monarchies, egged on by escaped French aristocrats. Britain not only joined in this onslaught but took the lead, even if the ideals of the revolution were inspired by English and American precedence and the government of the National Assembly was in some ways similar to that of Parliament in Britain. In the end, the competitive interests of the state weighed heavier than any ideological affinity, and Britain did not want a strong French Republic, a most dangerous competitor, on its doorstep.

Even before the Revolution, some military theorists had speculated about popular armies and their potential. Among them was Jacques de Guibert who, in 1772, prophesied:

The standing armies, while a burden on the people, are inadequate for the achievement of great and decisive results in war, and meanwhile the mass of the people, untrained in arms, degenerates [...] The hegemony over Europe will fall to that nation which [...] becomes possessed of manly virtues and creates a national army.²⁸

De Guibert's proposition was first put to the test in 1793-4 when the hard-pressed French militarized their society to an unprecedented level and turned the tables on their enemies.²⁹ In the process, they had to employ new military tactics to make the best use of their raw recruits, especially the attack in column, which contrasted with the more usual line of fire. But even these tactics were not unknown before the Revolution.

The unusual order of events in the French Revolution, in which democratization preceded militarization, was perhaps a result of the way in which the competitive pressure on France had become

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economic rather than strictly military. The state had to respond to this pressure by fiscal and economic reorganization that contradicted the vested interests of the politically powerful aristocracy. The competition with Britain made it necessary to remove this obstacle, which, in itself, amounted to a major political reorganization. As this reorganization took place it turned into a revolution and washed away the monarchy as well. It also released the latent power of the people that had been held in check for so long by the state. Threatened from abroad, the French people became a formidable military power that turned Europe on its head.

The emergence of the modern state had delayed the expansion cycle waiting to happen since the Late Middle Ages, but it did not eliminate the competitive pressure that eventually made it inevitable. Other states and communities, such as the Swiss and the Swedes, had experimented with popularizing warfare, but despite their spectacular military successes were too small to initiate any fundamental changes to the existing system because their opponents could contain them without copying them wholesale.

Not so with France. The French revolutionaries could militarize France since they represented the people, at least in a general theoretical way, and derived their power from them. Therefore, the people under arms were not a threat to them but the source of their power. The power of the popularized army turned France into a conquering empire, especially under Napoleon who, even if he became an autocrat, still ruled in the name of the people.³⁰ Faced with this threat, other European powers were forced to copy some of the innovations of the revolution if they were to stand a chance in fighting the French, even if they were appalled at the ideology behind it. The result was a great increase in the size of armies all over Europe, and this inevitably gave them something of the character of popular armies.³¹ And as monarchs and authorities had to take more account of the common people than before, this changed Europe forever. Even if Napoleon was eventually defeated, the French had let the cat out of the bag. As M. Knox put it: "No one could 'disinvent' mass politics or mass warfare."³² From now on, any state making do with a small professional army was taking a big chance.³³ Even if democratization preceded militarization in France, the reverse – and more usual – order of events prevailed in the European system as a whole. If the effects of the revolution had been confined to France, it would not have been of such monumental importance. Only by spreading its effects through militarization in the usual manner did it trigger a system-wide expansion cycle.

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It is worth speculating what would have happened had Napoleon and the French been victorious. They were not far from succeeding, and it must be regarded as a distinct possibility that something like this could happen during expansion cycles in general. The reason that Napoleon was so successful was that France was a pioneer polity within the system. It was the first substantial state to adopt a popular approach to warfare, which could not be contained without its opponents copying the innovation. This gave France a head start, a highly significant advantage that allowed it to conquer much of Europe before being finally brought to heel. I have chosen to call this initial prominence of a pioneer polity a *Napoleon syndrome*, in honour of the emperor.

As it is only logical that a pioneer polity derives significant advantages from its lead, it is entirely possible that a Napoleon syndrome has occurred several times in competitive systems on the brink of expansion. However, there are few if any other conclusive examples of this. The reason may be that the political intricacies of most earlier expansion cycles are unknown to us – that there have in fact been several such cases but the poverty of our sources make them difficult to detect. A possible example could be ancient Sparta, whose absolute domination of the surrounding territories and the complete military professionalization of its own population could be interpreted as relics of a Napoleon syndrome. Sparta would then have been the first Greek polity to adopt a popular army and would have used it to expand its territory and dominions. Sparta's opponents would eventually have learned from its example and managed to contain its expansionism without reversing its acquisitions.

Spartan domination of conquered territories may even illuminate what happens when a Napoleon syndrome is entirely successful and the pioneer polity manages to control or conquer the entire system. The pioneer polity will then become the nucleus of a new unified polity covering the whole system, which then ceases to exist as such. Expansion outside the system will probably not take place since the original popular army of the pioneer polity will turn itself into a professional army and social elite of a much larger polity, preoccupied mainly with consolidating its new position. The rest of the system will never experience militarization, democratization or expansion. In fact, a totally successful Napoleon syndrome would not only abruptly cut short any expansion cycle that might be brewing but also eliminate the conditions for such an expansion cycle by destroying the competitive system. Although this may have happened several times in the course of history, actual examples are hard to detect because they would simply appear as sudden but limited expansions of a

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single polity, a phenomenon which has occurred on countless occasions. Without good historical sources (a rarity in pre-medieval times) and detailed investigation, finding conclusive examples would be a daunting task and not one that I am prepared to undertake at the moment.

Napoleon's own Napoleon syndrome was cut short and as a consequence, Europe was allowed to experience its expansion cycle. The European system had been developing many of the ingredients of the modern world, not merely in the form of the industrialization that was emerging in England but also through the many scientific and technological improvements that made, for example, agriculture more productive and improved the health and life-expectancy of the population, thereby making much faster population growth possible. For the most part, however, I shall leave these aspects of modernization aside and simply point out those elements of modernization that show its affinity with expansion cycles.

All the basic elements of expansion cycles are conspicuous at the time of European modernization. Militarization and popular armies came to the fore in the French Revolution and reached their peak in the two World Wars of the 20th century, when most Western powers fielded armies that contained the majority of their able-bodied young men. Democratization is also an obvious feature, emerging in the American and French Revolutions and steadily gaining ground in the revolutions and reforms in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries, despite periodic setbacks of authoritarianism and dictatorship.

There is no guarantee that the common people will always support a democratic system of government. What they really want is for their personal situation to improve, and many can often be persuaded that this is best achieved by less than democratic means. The result can be a dictatorship based on popular support (i.e. *bonapartism*) that, despite appearances, is also a part of the democratization process. Communist and fascist regimes both characteristically justified their power by reference to the people, highlighting in the process how deeply rooted the feeling had become that there was no authority higher than the people itself. In this respect, these regimes resembled the ancient Greek tyrants or some of the Italian signori of the Middle Ages and indeed Napoleon Bonaparte who, riding the wave of the French Revolution, turned himself into an emperor of the people and proceeded to become a conqueror of nations, thereby giving his name to *bonapartism*.³⁴

The third part of the expansion cycle, the expansion process, is well demonstrated in the spectacular population growth that accompanied modernization. From 1750 to 1975, Europe's population

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more than quadrupled from 140 million to 635 million.³⁵ Even these numbers don't really do justice to the actual scale of growth, since there was a large spillover to European colonies overseas, especially America. It is estimated that during the great migrations of 1845-1914, some 41 million Europeans left for the Americas.³⁶ This population growth was in no small way the result of advances in modern medicine, especially with deadly epidemic diseases like smallpox being brought under control. But Europe also saw a shift in family patterns with more people marrying and at a younger age.³⁷ This in itself would have produced considerable population growth, even without the benefits of modern medicine. The reason for this change in family patterns seems to be basically the same as in earlier expansion cycles: greater economic opportunities for young people which enabled more of them to start their own families. In previous cycles these opportunities had necessarily come in the form of increased access to land and this still played a part, especially in the great exodus to America. On this occasion, however, they mainly came in the form of employment in the growing cities, where industrialization was creating new jobs and new prospects. All that people now needed to start a family of their own was the use of hands and head to perform the labour required. Normally, democratization would have created pressure from the general population to create the conditions that would make it easier for them to start their own families. In the modernization cycle, however, industrialization and emigration started relieving this pressure before it even became significant, with the result that it was rarely felt.

These processes are the same as we would expect from any expansion cycle, and there can be no doubt that the phenomenon usually called *modernization* included an expansion cycle. At the same time, it is also clear that modernization was much more than that. More than any other, the single feature that makes the European expansion cycle unique is the way in which it was intertwined with industrialization. The latter has totally altered the character of European societies over the past two centuries, transforming them from basically agrarian societies into industrial ones. In pre-industrial Europe, the great majority of the population made their living from the land – in most cases around 90% or more. In the modern industrialized world, agriculture rarely employs more than 5% of the population. As a result, the way in which we live has been completely altered. The expansion cycles we have been discussing in this book are primarily agrarian phenomena in which a crucial element was the availability and distribution of land. Today, however, this is clearly of limited importance as most people make

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their living as city-dwelling wage-earners. This means that we may not see any more expansion cycles, at least not of the same kind as the agrarian ones. The modern expansion cycle may have been the last of its kind. As it progressed along with industrialization, the agrarian societies that had fostered such cycles were destroyed. In earlier expansion cycles, land was really just a means of making a living and access to it was a precondition for being able to raise a family. The same role is now filled by jobs and careers, and it remains to be seen whether modern ways of making a living can, under some circumstances, also produce expansion cycles in the industrial or rather post-industrial world.

Although the modern expansion cycle has produced strong democratization, it has not resulted in the same reduction in economic stratification as most previous cycles. The old landed elite certainly lost its power, but its place has been taken by a new capitalist elite based on money, manufacture and trade. So why has this new economic stratification been tolerated by the emancipated common people? In previous expansion cycles, the common man based his livelihood on land and did not require a complex economic structure or much in the way of trade. The land provided for his needs and he needed little else. He certainly did not *need* a landlord as long as he was able to protect himself with the assistance of his fellow farmers. The landlord fulfilled no really useful purpose, and was simply a necessary evil if the farmer had no land of his own. Therefore, when the farmers were emancipated during an expansion cycle, they had few reservations about ridding themselves of the landlords since all they did was collect rents and tolls.³⁸ The socialist movement has tried to apply the same basic logic to the modern capitalist economy but has generally not been very successful. It is quite difficult to convince a wage-labourer that he does not need his employer – that without him he would still have a job to support his family. In place of the parasitism of the old elite we find a degree of mutualism – of common interest between the new capitalist elite and their labourers. The employers, managers or entrepreneurs of today actually do seem to serve some useful purpose for their workers. Their job, from their employees' point of view, is to ensure the well-being of the company and those who work for it, a role made necessary by the fact that most companies are now competing in markets in which there is no guarantee of success. The days when the common man only needed a bit of land to be self-sufficient and independent are gone.³⁹

And how did the Napoleonic Wars actually trigger the European expansion cycle? Here, the case of Prussia that rose to great power in the 19th century, is especially revealing. Following the collapse of the

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Prussian army under the Napoleonic onslaught in 1806, King Frederick William turned in desperation to the ideas of G.J.D. von Scharnhorst who postulated a revival of Prussia through partnership with the people, which he perceived to be the secret behind French success. Some social reforms were reluctantly introduced, but military reforms were adopted more enthusiastically, producing an army in which promotion was largely based on merit and where education and intellect were highly valued. This also popularized warfare or, to put it differently, militarized Prussian society to a similar level as that of France.⁴⁰ In the early 19th century, Prussia was substantially smaller both in terms of population and economy than its principal rivals such as Russia, Austria and France. To keep up with them after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, it therefore retained a proportionally large military, even when other powers reduced theirs (although not to pre-war levels). This was only possible by relying on conscription and reserves, thus giving the Prussian army something of the nature of a popular army. Of course, there was a certain danger inherent in the system, that of the citizen-soldiers turning their arms against their government, but this was countered by fostering enthusiastic patriotism and forging a 'partnership' between king and people.⁴¹

Short-time conscription followed by service in the reserves gradually became the norm in 19th century Europe. Large armies of a more or less popular character were increasingly a feature of European powerplay, and no state could afford to revert to the old system. Even if democratization preceded militarization in France, it did not do so in the rest of Europe where the needs of the state necessitated the use of the people as a military force. While this made it impossible to withstand the growing demands of the people for more personal freedom and democracy, it did not happen without a struggle. Although the arms race continued, the European states were reluctant to engage in war with each other for most of the 19th century, but were preoccupied rather with internal problems where reform alternated with revolution.⁴² A major war could not have been fought without the active participation of the people, which would have made it impossible to withstand their demands for more influence and better lives.

By the turn of the 20th century, most European states had developed some democratic institutions. Government by popular consent, implied or through elections, had become the rule. This was a new breed of states. Intrusive and bureaucratic, they justified their existence by reference to the people as a whole, encompassing all classes in a 'national' purpose. This was the age of nationalism, the ideology necessary to bind the people together in a common cause.⁴³

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These developments actually made states much stronger and more capable of waging large-scale wars as demonstrated in World War I (1914-1918), when conscription became the norm rather than the exception and whole generations of young men went to fight and die in the trenches. But it also meant that the ruling class became less well-defined, as no state could afford to neglect the will of the general population. Even if the old aristocracy was replaced by the new capitalists as the main source of economic power, democratization continued, boosted by the popular involvement in the World War, after which the right to vote usually became general and even included women. Although dictatorships, left and right wing, appeared in its aftermath in Russia, Italy, Germany and elsewhere, they do not really represent a reversal of the democratization process. All had a bonapartist character, all claimed to represent the 'people' in some way, and all signified lower and lower-middle class discontent and a willingness to take drastic measures to 'put things right'.

Democratization in the 20th century has produced states whose citizens expect to be treated fairly and enjoy a high standard of living, and these clearly desirable things are hard to deny to people with the constitutional ability to replace the government. It is probably this constant drive of the emancipated common people to improve their lot that is behind the emergence of the modern welfare state and also the consumer economy, which is hard to explain simply as an automatic development of the capitalist market. In democracies, the common people have the power to claim their share of society's wealth and have done so through elections, strikes and labour unions. In this way, they have managed to improve their living standards and turned themselves into the mass-market consumers that have become so fundamental to the modern economy. Egalitarianism of some sort is a common feature of expansion cycles, and democratization usually encourages economic egalitarianism, even to the point of eliminating the old elite. This is what happened in the socialist revolutions and regimes, all of which occurred in non-democratic states. Where democracies were allowed to develop, the trend towards economic egalitarianism has been unusually mild in the modern expansion cycle, probably due to the profound changes in the economic system that accompanied it. One aspect of this is the transference of economic precedence from the land-based aristocracy to industrialists and capitalists. As in all expansion cycles, the old elite did in fact lose power and prominence. But in this case it was replaced by a new economic elite that despite democratization and egalitarian tendencies, has generally managed to strengthen its position.

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Expansion cycles tend to destabilize the competitive systems that produce them. Societies change quickly and old balances can easily be overturned. Europe had already felt this in the Napoleonic Wars, when it came close to being unified under a single power. Although Napoleon was ultimately defeated and a balance restored that lasted for a century, it was again overturned in the 20th century, not so much by World War I but rather by World War II of 1939-1945. Hitler's Germany made an attempt to control all Europe and might very well have succeeded had it not been for the two frontier empires that Europe had produced. To the west was the United States, to the east the Soviet Union. Both had grown strong by expanding outside Europe and now brought this power to bear on the European battlefield. This was too much for Germany and as it crumbled under attacks from east and west, the European system was destroyed. From 1945 Europe ceased to function as a competitive system as it was split down the middle into satellites or zones of interest of the two superpowers.⁴⁴

Even if European-derived powers have continued to dominate world politics, European expansion, strictly speaking, was over by the end of World War II. But what about the other processes of the expansion cycle? Militarization reached its peak in the two World Wars of the 20th century but since then, popular armies have been disappearing. Perhaps this has something to do with the limited nature of most wars undertaken by industrialized countries in the nuclear age. It is certainly a reflection of the general feeling in democratic societies that wars are such an extreme measure that they have to be very important to justify wrenching people from their civilian existence and sacrificing their lives by the millions. In the meantime, armies are generally becoming smaller and more professional and better adapted to fighting limited wars. Conscription has been abandoned or severely reduced in most Western countries, its place taken by professionals serving for long periods of time. Simultaneously, the investment behind each soldier has skyrocketed as wars have increasingly become tests of technology and wealth rather than manpower. This looks very much like a return to elite warfare, so reversing the prevalent trend of the last seven or eight centuries.

It is only natural to wonder whether these developments might endanger the democracy sponsored by the democratization process of the modern expansion cycle.⁴⁵ This would seem to be predicted by Andreski's simple (not to say simplistic) formula of co-variance between the *military participation ratio* and popular involvement in decision making (p. 51 above). At present this does not seem to be

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happening. On the contrary, democracy is flourishing more than ever before in human history, and has become the absolutely dominant form of government not only in Europe and European-derived societies but also in many other parts of the world. The modern world is very much different from that of ancient Europe where democracy died as empires arose. Even in states housing populations of over a billion, modern bureaucracies are fully capable of managing modern administrations without sacrificing democracy. At the same time, professional armies, run by centralized states, are not the same as warrior elites doubling as social elites, as was the case with the aristocracy of medieval Europe. Centralized democratic states appear to have the ability to practise different kinds of warfare as the situation demands, without it affecting the nature of government. Still, it wouldn't hurt for those who cherish democracy to be aware of the possible implications of growing elite warfare, especially since there is little reason to believe that modern democracies are necessarily the final word in competitive political structures.

European expansion not only affected the wider world as its victims. The expansion itself was also exported, and every country affected by European expansion also experienced some version of the expansion cycle. Militarization, democratization and, in particular, expansion in the form of population growth were major elements in the creation of the world system that superseded the European one in the 20th century.

The World System

The European system left a great legacy, not only in the development of modern thought, science, technology and economy but also in the spread of these things to the rest of the world. From the time Europe became an effective competitive system it began exporting itself overseas. This tendency reached its peak at the time of *imperialism* in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Europe and European-derived states controlled virtually the whole world apart from Eastern Asia, and even there they held considerable influence. From the middle of the 19th century, European military superiority became so great that it ensured victory over most opponents with remarkable ease.⁴⁶ Gradually it dawned on the non-European powers that if they were to hold their own in competition with their European counterparts, they had to copy them to a large extent – industrialize, modernize and militarize. None was more successful in doing so than Japan, which was already able to get the better of Russia, a major

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European power, by the beginning of the 20th century, in a war in the east. Thus, Europe exported itself to the world in two ways: either by establishing colonies, or by inducing existing states outside Europe to copy it in order to be able to compete effectively. By the 19th century, European competition increasingly engulfed the whole world and affected all those states that still remained independent. Japan and China could not remain aloof from developments in Europe and were forced to compete with the European powers, whether they liked it or not. In this way, a global competitive system was already taking shape from the late 19th century. To begin with, it was no more than an extension of the European one but since 1945, when Europe itself was split between the zones of influence of two superpowers, only the world system remained.

From 1945 to 1991 this world system was dominated by two superpowers that both began as frontier empires to the European system. Other powers, without a European background, also made themselves felt. Japan had done so even before 1945 and, despite its defeat in World War II and the subsequent political inertia that this caused, has become an economic powerhouse. China's colossal population automatically makes it a great power, and with the spectacular economic growth of recent years it may very well surpass European derived powers before long. Once it escapes from its chronic poverty, India may also become a great power in the modern world system. Despite this, the truth is that the world system is still rather rudimentary as a competitive system. There is too great a difference between the wealth and economy of its constituent states to enable them to compete on an equal footing, and the supremacy of the USA, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has made the system somewhat lopsided. The modern world system is also plagued by our success in producing ever more powerful weapons that make the ultimate competitive behaviour, an all-out war, extremely dangerous for the human race as a whole. Nuclear war is obviously not a sensible option, but a state that owns nuclear weapons and feels critically threatened might still resort to using them. This takes some of the urgency out of the competition, at least in a strictly military sense, as no state is likely to really threaten another that owns nuclear weapons.⁴⁷ At the same time, however, countries like Iran and North Korea may see the possession of nuclear weapons as their only guarantee of safety in a world dominated by a superpower that characterizes them as 'evil' and sees fit to periodically threaten them with invasion or economic sanctions.

In this situation the larger European states have been relegated to secondary status, most of them allied to the only superpower left, the

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United States. There is no longer a European competitive system, only a world system, although it seems inefficient in many respects. Europe is now faced with choices similar to the ones that faced the French and the Italians as a more effective European system took shape in the Late Middle Ages (chapter 8). Like the Italians, the European states can remain divided and continue their internal competition as secondary powers of the larger system, but the history of Italy in the early modern period does not indicate that this is a particularly good choice. Alternatively, the Europeans can follow the lead of the medieval French and unite in a strong power, able to play a major role in the emerging larger system. A united Europe would emerge as a world power on a par with the United States, and the world system certainly seems to need some counterbalance to US power. Of course, Europe has already taken its first steps towards unification, although under severe controversy. Whether it is able or willing to go all the way or simply settles for the current intermediary solution of close cooperation remains to be seen.

In a world beset with nuclear weapons, competition between states may not seem such a good idea. Whenever nuclear powers quarrel, there is a danger of things getting out of hand, with the whole of humanity having to pay the price. Have we thus come to the end of competitive systems with nothing but a choice between nuclear destruction and a 'world state' that would be able to keep the peace? Of these two options, the latter is certainly preferable. When the Romans unified the Mediterranean basin there followed a time of peace and prosperity, although the empire gradually did become sluggish and conservative in the absence of effective competition.

But perhaps competition between states can be kept alive without endangering the very existence of humanity. If one wishes to be optimistic, one might speculate that it is possible to create a world system in which competition is active but wars are eliminated. After all, in many complex adaptive systems (chapter 1) it is not the agents themselves who actually compete, but the solutions or patterns that appear within the system. What determines which solutions are most effective is the feedback, which in competitive systems comes in the form of political domination. As long as the feedback comes in this guise, I suspect that armed conflicts are inevitable. However, if the feedback came not in the form of political domination but economic prosperity and popular well-being, this might suffice, with the former bringing economic power and influence and the latter attracting the most valuable workforce. In fact, we have already taken some positive steps in this direction. Ever since the early modern period, the importance of the economy to the power of the state has been growing,

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and competition between states has increasingly become economic in nature. Conversely, such a solution would require an effective international security system to guarantee the independence and sovereignty of all states and also to make it impossible for one state to attack another. Such a system is still a long way off, and the problems in constructing it are formidable. But for those who wish to remain optimistic, it might be an ideal solution.

¹ Wesson (1978), Jones (1981), Tilly (1992). These scholars would talk of 'state systems' which I consider a subset of competitive systems.

² Tilly (1992), p. 89.

³ Hale (1986), p. 25. Tilly (1992), pp. 164-165.

⁴ Parker (1988), p. 62.

⁵ E.g. McNeill (1984), pp 111-116.

⁶ For medieval armies see Verbruggen (1997), pp. 164-169. The transformation started in the 15th century, see Contamine (1986), pp. 170-172. For early modern armies, see e.g. Parker (1988), pp. 45-46; Eltis (1998), pp. 27-28.

⁷ Parker (1988), pp. 10-16.

⁸ Hale (1986), p. 46.

⁹ Tilly (1992), pp. 68-70.

¹⁰ Tilly (1992), p. 82. See also Hale (1986), pp. 69-73; McNeill (1984), pp. 136-139.

¹¹ McNeill (1984), p. 60.

¹² According to McEvedy & Jones (1978), pp. 57, 59, 81.

¹³ Somewhat similar ideas are expressed by Skocpol (1994, pp. 133-166).

¹⁴ For an excellent account of the agrarian dynamics of early America, see Kulikoff (2000).

¹⁵ See Kulikoff (2000), pp. 125-150.

¹⁶ Katajala (2004a), pp. 49-51. Glete (2002), pp. 182-185, 201-202.

¹⁷ Johansson (2004).

¹⁸ Katajala (2004b), pp. 160-161, 166-167. Katajala (2004d), p. 263. Glete (2002), p. 192-195.

¹⁹ Lindgren (1985), p. 317. Parker (1988), 52-54. Glete (2002), p. 194.

²⁰ Lindgren (1985), 332. Glete (2002), pp. 194-195.

²¹ Lindgren (1985), 330-335. Glete (2002), pp. 195, 211. During the Great Northern War, in 1710, 8% of the population was in the military (Tilly 1992, p. 123). During the Thirty Years' War the proportion was about 3.5% (Glete, 2002, p. 205).

²² McEvedy & Jones (1978), pp. 52-53, 73-82.

²³ Tilly (1992), pp. 82-83.

²⁴ Hale (1986), p. 71. Lynn (2001), pp. 52-53.

²⁵ Wilson (1999), p. 80 (Table 3.1).

²⁶ Kulikoff (2000), pp. 167-168. These developments were not confined to England but were particularly noticeable there.

²⁷ McNeill (1984), pp. 187-189.

²⁸ Quoted in Wikipedia

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Antoine_Hippolyte,_Comte_de_Guibert) accessed 10th October 2008.

²⁹ McNeill (1984), pp. 189-200. Black (1994), pp. 223-224. Knox (2001).

³⁰ See e.g. Knox (2001).

³¹ McNeill (1984), pp. 201, 207-208. Knox (2001).

³² Knox (2001), p. 72.

³³ Andreski (1968), p. 69. Tilly (1992), pp. 83-84.

³⁴ *Bonapartism* is also specifically used to describe the mainly 19th century political movement in France that supported the rule of the House of Bonaparte. The current use goes back to Marx's "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852), although I employ the term in a somewhat wider sense than usual.

³⁵ According to McEvedy & Jones (1978), p. 18.

³⁶ According to McEvedy & Jones (1978), p. 279. The number is far from certain and could easily be higher.

³⁷ In 1703 only 45% of men in their thirties were married in Iceland. By the mid and late-19th century the proportion was about 60-70%, despite population growth which in earlier social settings would have made marriage less frequent. *Hagskinna*, pp. 131-133. This was a fairly typical development in Europe.

³⁸ For the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, see Skocpol (1994), pp. 213-239.

³⁹ Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining the fact that all successful socialist revolutions have occurred in societies that were still largely agrarian. Unlike in industrial societies, the common people didn't feel any 'need' for the rich. Contrary to original Marxist thinking, the peasants, because of their economic autonomy, may have had considerably more revolutionary potential than the working class.

⁴⁰ Knox (2001), pp. 70-71.

⁴¹ McNeill (1984), pp. 215-221 (see also pp. 242-256). Knox (2001), pp. 68-72.

⁴² See McNeill (1984), pp. 220-221.

⁴³ See e.g. Gellner (1983).

⁴⁴ See also Wesson (1978), pp. 227-232.

⁴⁵ McNeill (1984), p. 381 expresses such fears.

⁴⁶ McNeill (1984), pp. 256-261.

⁴⁷ For the modern world system and its problems, see also Wesson (1978) pp. 228-263.

10. OVERVIEW

As our journey draws to a close it is time to stop and review what we have learned about the two main themes of this book. Competitive systems and expansion cycles have been recurrent phenomena in European history for at least the past three thousand years. Typical system expansion cycles occur within competitive systems and all such systems continue into expansion if they live long enough. We have also found that although expansion cycles occur most frequently in such competitive systems, there are at least two other conditions that can produce them. These variations – colonizing expansions and empire expansions – are propelled by the same basic mechanism as system expansions, although they begin differently and can have rather different characteristics.

While the focus of this book has been Europe, there is nothing to say that similar phenomena have not existed elsewhere – in fact there are clear indications of competitive systems and expansion cycles in many parts of the world (see Appendix 1). They may have been more common in Europe than most other places, possibly because of the presence of a long-lived and prosperous zone of agrarian barbarians who neither succumbed to nor built large empires, but whose repeated expansion cycles maintained the barbarian condition and retarded the growth of states.

Some of the competitive systems and expansion cycles mentioned in this book.

Competitive system / cause of expansion	Expansion cycle
Colonizing expansion by first farmers.	The original spread of agriculture in Europe, ca. 7 th to 4 th millennium BC.
Hypothetical competitive system in the Carpathian Basin, mid 2 nd millennium BC.	Urnfield expansion, ca. 13 th to 12 th centuries BC.
Greek city-states, 1 st millennium BC. The system survived the expansion until incorporated into the Hellenistic System	Greek expansion, ca. 8 th to 6 th century BC.
Hypothetical competitive system, Gallic peoples, early and mid-1 st millennium BC.	Gallic expansion, ca. 5 th to 3 rd century BC.
Hellenistic world (poorly developed as a competitive system), ca. 300 to 2 nd century BC.	No expansion. Destroyed by Roman expansion

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Competitive system / cause of expansion	Expansion cycle
Etruscan system, mid-1 st millennium BC.	Probable expansion cycle in the 7 th and 6 th centuries BC.
Germanic system, late 1 st millennium BC to 5 th century AD.	Germanic expansion in three phases: a) 3 rd to 1 st centuries BC; b) 2 nd to 3 rd centuries AD; c) 4 th to 6 th centuries AD.
Empire expansion. Rome as a frontier empire to the Etruscan and Hellenistic systems.	Roman expansion, ca. 4 th century BC to 1 st century AD.
Gallic system, 3 rd or 2 nd century BC to 1 st century BC. Successor to the earlier (hypothetical) system.	No expansion. Destroyed by Roman expansion.
Irish system (uncertain but likely), early 1 st millennium AD, possibly starting in late 1 st millennium BC. Resuming after the expansion, somewhat altered.	Irish expansion, ca. 3 rd to 5 th centuries AD.
Colonizing expansion caused by Germanic evacuation. Alternatively, a hypothetical competitive system.	Slavic expansion, 5 th or 6 th century AD to Early Middle Ages.
Anglo-Saxon system, 5 th or 6 th century AD to 9 th century AD, and continuation of Germanic expansion.	Anglo-Saxon expansion, 5 th to ca. 7 th century AD.
Scandinavian system, 1 st millennium AD.	Viking expansion, ca 800 to 1050 AD.
French medieval system, 10 th century AD to Late Middle Ages.	No expansion cycle (but a certain amount of elite expansion). Destroyed by European consolidation.
Italian medieval system, 11 th century AD to ca. 1500 AD.	No expansion. Destroyed by European consolidation.
Icelandic medieval system, ca. AD 900 to 1262.	No system expansion. Destroyed by European consolidation. Colonizing expansion, however, during the formation of the system, a continuation of Viking expansion.
Colonizing expansion with some elements of empire expansion, later merging with the effects of European expansion of the modern cycle.	The colonization of North America by settlers of European descent, 17 th to 20 th century AD.
European system, ca. 1000 (1500) to 1945 AD.	Modern expansion cycle, ca. 1800 to 1950 AD.
Modern world system, beginning in the 19 th century and still active.	No expansion (yet).

The table presents, in schematic form, a list of the competitive systems and expansion cycles on which the ideas presented in this book are based, and these are the systems and expansive episodes that form the basis of the discussion below.

Conditions

Firstly, we must consider some conditions for competitive systems and expansion cycles that are vital to their workings, chief of which is an anti-Malthusian approach to population history. Contrary to what Malthus thought, population growth is not usually limited by the number of people that the land can physically support, given the current level of productive technologies. In Europe at least, where death by disease was much more common than by hunger, the population was usually far below any hypothetical ‘carrying capacity’ – a concept which is in any case of very limited applicability since it ignores the human ability to react to population pressure. This means that there was usually a certain leeway for population growth, even spectacular growth, induced not by some new productive technologies but by social changes. It does not mean that there was no population pressure. On the contrary, population pressure was the normal state of affairs, although periodically relieved. But we must make a clear distinction between Malthusian population pressure, a situation in which the land supposedly could not support more people, and *social* population pressure.

Social population pressure is not determined by the actual productivity of land, but rather by its social or economic availability. Even if the land could physically support more people, there was an embedded resistance in early European society to making it do so. As long as more or less all land was being used or for some reason unavailable, there was a shortage of land for those wanting to set up new households. Even if they were not using it intensively, those that occupied land were often not eager to part with any of it, just so that somebody else could use it to raise a family. Land can be used in a number of different ways, but these can all be placed in a line ranging from *extensive* to *intensive* land use. Extensive land use means that land is used poorly and produces little food per acre for consumption. An extreme example of this would be the parks that some nobles and kings preserved exclusively for their hunting pleasure or maintaining unoccupied and underutilized buffer zones around the lands of many early tribes. Normally, however, extensive land use took the form of

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assigning the land to pasture rather than growing crops. Using land extensively required little input of labour for each calorie produced for consumption, and therefore represented a relatively easy way of life. Intensive land use was the exact opposite, with high productivity of land but low productivity of labour. As the population grew, the balance shifted from extensive to intensive land use, with fields and gardens increasingly replacing pastures and hunting grounds. Feeding a family by raising crops usually required more labour than by tending livestock or hunting but allowed the family to subsist on a smaller piece of land.

Given these circumstances, it is easy to understand why those who occupied land were reluctant to part with it, even if this would not have compromised their ability to make a living. Parting with land, no matter how poorly it was being used, always resulted in having to work harder for a living and thus in a lesser quality of life. This is what is meant by social population pressure. As long as a population is growing, however slightly, and all land is occupied, however sparsely, there will be a shortage of land and a reluctance to part with it. This is aptly described as population pressure because it negatively affects reproduction.

Most agrarian societies can manage a steady but modest population growth accommodated by intensification and improvements in agriculture, which are in turn stimulated by population pressure. However, sudden bursts of population growth are almost always caused by better access to land. If land is plentiful, more people are able to start families and have more children. Colonizing expansion cycles get started when previously unoccupied land suddenly becomes available. But land can also become available by appropriating it from somebody else. This can take several forms such as simply splitting it into smaller parcels, bringing more intensive cultivation to commons and parks, or taking it away from the social elite or from another tribe. If social and political developments make any of these means possible, we are likely to see spectacular population growth until these conditions subside. And as they usually subside as the population expands, such episodes don't normally last much more than a couple of centuries. Therefore, population growth is often determined by the social and political power structure as, for leaders as well as their clients, access to land ultimately depends on power.

Broadly speaking, the top-level power structures in agrarian societies fall into two categories – states and non-states. The main difference between them lies in the fact that states possess effective administrations that make them capable of more deliberate actions,

which can be an advantage when competing with other polities. The overall political organization of society played a significant part in how it worked on lower levels. Not only did the state, where it existed, allow more intricate and sophisticated social relations, but it also played a part in determining the balance of power within society, rarely in favour of the underdog. However, the difference between states and stateless societies should not be exaggerated. Even if statehood, writing and 'civilization' tend to go together and significantly affect social development, the same basic rules outlined above apply to both. And even if states sometimes develop as a means to make society more effective in competition with other societies, this is not a universal rule. In fact, statehood can be a liability in such competition, especially under the conditions of expansion cycles. Therefore, the state is not an unqualified advantage, a 'progressive' move that always bestows superiority over stateless societies. Rather, it appeared under certain (and probably varied) circumstances, often stimulated by specific problems. Sometimes states were successful and sometimes not, although the most general trend has been, of course, towards statehood.

States or no states, human societies have to be able to preserve themselves from external threats. Just like animals and plants in the natural world, human societies live under conditions of selective pressure. The social structure that makes a society strong and capable of self-preservation is the one most likely to survive and spread. This is the most fundamental approach used in this book, and it finds its precedent in the application of Darwinism in biology. After all, the human species is just one of many that inhabit the Earth. When applying this method to human history, individual polities and their structural types take the place of individual life-forms and the inner workings of societies correspond to the anatomy of animals. The reproductive success of an animal, plant or fungus depends on its phenotype (the physical form it takes) and how effectively this enables it to utilize its environment. Just like an animal, a human polity in a competitive environment depends on its structure for survival, the equivalent of an animal's phenotype. However, unlike animals, social structure is not determined by genes but can be copied directly between societies. Polities can consciously imitate each other.¹

Competition between polities has a decisive impact on social development since, in order to survive, they have to adopt internal structures that prove adaptive in their specific environments. Otherwise, they perish. It should be emphasised that this does not necessarily lead to societies that are progressively more pleasant or humane (in this sense 'advanced') – the only thing that matters is

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survival. If oppressive and brutal societal forms possess an advantage, these will prevail.

Throughout the history of agrarian societies, the main instrument of competition has been war. Particularly when societies exist in highly competitive environments, their ability to make war determines not only their power but their very existence. To some extent, military power is determined by political organization, for example, the presence (or not) of a state and the way in which it functions. But it also depends on technology and tactics that, especially in decentralized political units, are closely connected with social structure. Generally speaking, military practice fluctuates between elite and mass warfare. The former is characterized by a small number of highly proficient, superbly equipped warriors, the latter by a large number of adequately or poorly equipped soldiers or warriors, sometimes with little training. In most cases, a combination of the two is practised but the emphasis swings between the two extremes. Centralized states are often able to take such swings in their stride, adapting their standing armies to suit them without immediately altering their social structure, although this can happen eventually. However, in decentralized (feudal) states or barbarian societies, a warrior elite is usually also a social elite and fluctuations between elite and mass warfare often profoundly affect the social structure. Power is ultimately based on the force of arms, and when the pendulum swings far enough towards mass warfare this can, and usually does, lead to a transference of power from the elite to the lower classes through the development of popular armies.

Popular armies are the ultimate mass armies, comprised basically of the general population of able-bodied men under arms (or a substantial segment of this group – sometimes even including women). As such, they constitute a maximization of military power. However, popular armies, as a social phenomenon, tend to be rather short lived and only exist for as long as the general population sees any sense in participating in continued warfare. Military importance brings political power to the people and gives them the option to choose not to fight. Unless their vital interests are threatened, this is what they eventually do, and so the popular army disbands itself.

Competitive Systems

Complex adaptive systems straddle the border between order and chaos and are made up of agents that constantly interact with each other. They show a remarkable ability for self-regulation, and thus

preserve themselves in a certain equilibrium. At the same time, they also have a great propensity for evolving and developing new solutions, and their appearance in evolutionary biology heralds dynamic evolution, the process by which new solutions emerge. The living world is made up of a hierarchy of such systems ranging from self-replicating molecules through single-cell and multicellular organisms to entire societies, with each higher-level system being made up of a number of lower-level ones. Human societies are complex adaptive systems, and the development of larger and more complex societies in itself increases the pace of change. But, more importantly in the present context, groups of human societies can also form complex adaptive systems. This happens when a number of (usually) related but autonomous polities exist in close proximity, with vigorous interaction between them. The result is the same as in biology: unusually dynamic and rapid developments. The driving force behind them is the intensified competition between the polities, all of which strive to ensure their own survival and increase their power at the expense of others. Useful innovations, whether in warfare, culture or social structure, quickly spread within the system by copy or conquest.

The usual term for such systems in human history is *state systems*. Several scholars have written about them, such as those of ancient Greece or modern Europe, often attributing – and in my view quite correctly – the unusual dynamism of these societies to the presence of such systems. However, this term implies that the phenomenon is confined to state societies and excludes the stateless barbarian societies that have existed in many parts of the world and are particularly prominent in the history of early Europe. For this reason I have used the term *competitive system* as a substitute for the earlier *state system*, thereby indicating the inclusion of barbarian systems. This term should also incorporate what many archaeologists call *peer polity interaction*, a term that they use to describe the dynamic relations between groups which are usually prehistoric and stateless. Whenever a competitive system appeared, history took a new turn, and we see a series of innovations and new developments. This could just as well happen in barbarian Europe as in the civilized Mediterranean, although the barbarian systems are less well-known due to their lack of literacy. Not surprisingly, many of these barbarian systems developed statehood and writing and thus became civilized, with examples including the Greeks, the Gauls (1st century BC), Irish (probably), Anglo-Saxons and Vikings (possibly). Even some of the early Germans invented *runes* and seem to have developed state-like organizations.

Competitive systems appear in many different ways, and this sometimes sets its mark on them for their duration. From my research, I think that we can discern at least six different ways that they can come into existence as outlined below, although many actual cases combine two or more 'types'. However, only one of these types, the *periphery system* (no. 2), is of great importance as a variation on the competitive system theme. It should also be noted that some systems can change their character and combine elements of different categories as they evolve.

1) *Out of chaos*. Sometimes competitive systems seem to appear out of nowhere and without clear reasons. It can be suggested that, in these cases, loosely organized and incohesive groups that were not very competitive developed better levels of organization and internal solidarity, and thus gradually intensified competition. This certainly seems to have been the case in the Icelandic system and also perhaps in the Sumerian and Etruscan systems, although the latter pair are only discussed briefly in this book. Truth be told, this kind of development seems to have played a part in the emergence of most barbarian systems although other factors were also present.

2) *Periphery systems*. These represent an important variation on competitive systems since the mechanism of competition is a little different than in the other cases. Periphery systems appear on the borders of powerful states or empires, where many small polities struggle to survive and maintain their independence in the presence of a much superior power. This happens when an empire expands but cannot, for some reason, expand far enough to eliminate competition from smaller and often fundamentally different polities. Once the expansion stops, the empire is at a disadvantage because it is usually profoundly different from its smaller neighbours and cannot copy all their military or social innovations, ironically often brought about by its own aggression in the first place. In these cases, the competition, at least initially, is primarily with the great power, although internal competition also plays a part, especially if, as often happens, the small polities gradually gain the upper hand against the great power. A periphery system may have existed in the Carpathian Basin just before the Urnfield expansion, and also among the original Gauls vis-à-vis the Hallstatt 'state'. The Greek system also acquired some characteristics of a peripheral system once it came into close contact with the Persian Empire. But the best

example is undoubtedly the Germanic system as it came into contact with the Romans, although it originated quite differently.

3) *Chain reaction.* Competitive systems rarely exist in geographical isolation, and usually interact with polities outside them. In such cases it is not always easy to discern where the system ends, as the competition within the system extends to its borders and beyond. In this way, the effects of the competition within the system can trigger a chain reaction outside it, in effect spreading out or even creating new systems. This is especially important in the case of expansion cycles (below) when the societies within the system spread rapidly and over extensive areas, often spreading the seeds of new competitive systems as they go. This element can be seen in the creation of the European system in the Middle Ages as it expanded from its core towards Northern and Eastern Europe, and also in the creation of the modern world system from its European roots. It also seems to have been the way in which the original Gallic system affected the creation of the Germanic system.

4) *Barbarian conquerors.* The best-known examples of competitive systems arising after the onslaught of barbarian conquerors are the Greek and European systems. In both cases we have a great civilized empire destroyed by barbarian invaders, plunging the area into a 'dark' period. After an interval of several centuries, a new civilization slowly emerges based on the combined traditions of the civilized population and the barbarians, but it emerges not in a unified state but as a competitive system. As a result, while the polities of these systems are ultimately based on the ethnicities of the age of invasions, they also benefit from the cultural traditions of the fallen empire. This element is probably also present to some extent in the second Gallic system, which appeared after the Gallic expansion in Gaul and combined the traditions of the expanding Gauls with the traditions of the Hallstattians and others who had been wholly or partially assimilated.

5) *Disintegrating kingdoms.* In weakly organized or decentralized states (or even barbarian kingdoms), central authority sometimes breaks down and the kingdom or state dissolves into several smaller polities. As all of these share a common background and culture, this usually instigates a struggle for hegemony, and if none of the polities is strong enough to triumph, this in turn often leads to the formation of a competitive system. The best examples of this phenomenon are the systems of medieval France and Italy,

Expansions

both of which emerged as a result of 'feudal anarchy'. Other examples might include the *warring states* in China, Japanese 'feudalism' (see Appendix 1) and, perhaps, the Irish 'provinces' which may originally have been simple states but appear to have fallen apart in an expansion cycle.

6) *Improved communications*. When communication technologies markedly improve, remote societies are brought closer together. Distances seem to shrink, and this can have the effect of creating a competitive system. Polities that were once relatively isolated are suddenly in close contact with others, and competition ensues. This is obviously an element in the creation of today's world system but it also played a part in the development of the Viking system through advances in seafaring. Better communications generally allow larger systems to emerge. Most early and barbarian systems were relatively small, but as communications improved we see the rise of the large incipient Hellenistic system, facilitated by the Mediterranean sea routes. In the Middle Ages, increased trade, especially using waterways, made it possible for Europe to become a unified competitive system, albeit initially a rather loose and incohesive one, enabling the existence of local systems within the larger one. Europe only came into its own as a competitive system at the beginning of the modern period, eliminating in the process the last local system (in Italy). It is worth remembering that this occurred at a time when great strides were being made in communications technologies, particularly seafaring, not only bringing the continent together but exporting it to the world.

This, then, is how competitive systems come into existence. Of course, these are 'ideal types', so beloved by social scientists, but which reality has an annoying habit of muddling up. It is also important to realize that a system's type or the way in which it came into being is rarely very important, since most behave in a similar fashion irrespective of their origin. It should also be noted that the preceding list is not necessarily exhaustive, but simply a collection of observed conditions important in the examples examined in this book. There may very well be other elements that can affect the creation of competitive systems. History is not a one-way street in which there is only one way to go and only one way that events can happen. With the exception of *periphery systems*, how these systems emerged is not usually a significant factor in determining how they functioned. The most important thing about them is that they emerged at all, and the way in which they affected human history. That being said, it is

significant for European history that the continent seems to have had more than its fair share of competitive systems, and this seems connected with the barbarian zone in Europe. All of the six elements above can at least theoretically involve barbarians, and some of them must necessarily do so.

What is it then that distinguishes a competitive system from any other group of polities? A definition might go something like this: a competitive system is a group of similar but not identical polities that interact closely and compete with each other, and through this competition facilitate rapid development of their competitive skills.

From this definition and the previous discussion in this book we can now list a few characteristics shared by all competitive systems (see pp. 61-63).

- 1) The polities involved must be autonomous and able to make their own decisions based on their own assessment of their interests.
- 2) There must be some kind of political equilibrium, so that no single polity is able to dominate the system.
- 3) In order to be able to interact and compete effectively, the polities must share a common geographical area.
- 4) The polities must be socially, culturally and economically similar in order to be able to copy each other's innovations.
- 5) Populations within competitive systems must have a dual identity; an external one for the system as a whole and an internal one for the polity to which they belong.
- 6) Competitive systems habitually show cultural and technological dynamism.

The competition within these systems is basically a struggle for survival, and often tends to focus on war and a social structure that maximizes the military capabilities of each polity. However, this tends to spill over into various other fields. European competition in the modern period became increasingly economic as a healthy economy created more money to spend on armies, war and the support of political allies, and this trend has been carried over into the modern world system. But competition also involves a number of intangible elements such as prestige and solidarity. The prestige of a kingdom, state or tribe largely determines how reliable ones allies are and how ready others are to attack. At the same time, solidarity within a polity signifies a willingness to belong to it, which in turn induces a readiness to make sacrifices for it. Prestige and solidarity are enhanced by diverting resources to many sorts of 'cultural' activities such as monumental buildings, literature, the arts and science, which explains why competitive systems usually seem to excel in at least

some of these fields. Even barbarian or semi-barbarian systems, such as the Gallic or Viking ones, created new and remarkable styles of art evident in their metalwork and woodcarvings.

Competitive systems come in two basic flavours, barbarian and civilized, the latter having adopted statehood. Barbarians in fact often develop statehood in times of elitization (below) and thus become civilized. Even if the difference should not be exaggerated, it does have some effect on how these systems function. Statehood often makes polities more dangerous competitors and it also usually effects the social relations within each polity. However, the most noticeable difference is that states almost always develop some form of writing. Literacy in itself affects the nature of competition, enabling the accumulation of knowledge, which can be an important competitive element, while generally stimulating the growth of literature, philosophy, science and technology. One could perhaps speculate that civilized (state) systems are usually more stable, longer-lived and more successful in creating new elements of culture, economy and technology, while barbarian ones mainly concentrate on militarism and expansion. But it would be a mistake to make too much of this difference. We know much more about the civilized systems because they have left us with written documents. Even if we know less about them, the barbarian systems, within the limitation of their illiteracy, may have been just as innovative as their civilized counterparts. The difference between these two kinds of competitive systems in terms of how they functioned is therefore probably more apparent than real.

Competitive systems tend to be self-regulating, with the mechanism of the balance of power preventing any member of the system from becoming too strong. However, while this is most effective in the centre of the system, it may be less so at the edge. Whether or not they are actually considered members (included in the outer identity), polities that live at the edge of such systems tend to benefit from their innovations but are not as restricted as others by the balance of power. Polities like these can sometimes use the fruits of a system to expand outside it into alien territories. Competitive systems tend to be militaristic and highly capable in warfare, and these border polities benefit from this when they expand. Although initially not strong enough to encroach on the system itself, they have free rein to grow stronger by conquering extensive lands on the outside and developing them. In this way they can become *frontier empires* that in time may overshadow the original competitive system. Examples of this include the Macedonian Empire as an outgrowth of Greece, and Rome, probably first in relation to the Etruscan system and then possibly to the Hellenistic system. Modern Europe sprouted

no less than two frontier empires: the USA and Russia. The growth of such empires often involves rapid colonization of vast territories, a process that can closely resemble expansion cycles (below). This was evident in the colonization of continental North America but also played a part in Roman expansion. Frontier empires are confined to sate systems but do not occur in barbarian systems since they depend on an effective administration to control their newly conquered territories.

Robert Wesson, who did much to illuminate state systems, believed that there was a certain connection between the pluralism of state systems and the internal pluralism of individual states: that one fostered the other.² However, I don't think that this is really the case, except in a round-about way. The internal pluralism Wesson refers to is, in part, the democratization of expansion cycles. While it is true that all competitive systems that survive long enough enter expansion cycles and so experience democratization (and 'pluralism'), there is no constant drive toward this during the life of the system. Rather, it comes as an abrupt break when the military situation necessitates the inclusion of the masses. Competitive systems, such as the European one, can exist for long periods without stimulating pluralistic societies and even encourage the opposite – coercive or despotic states – as their most competitive members. There is no guarantee that competition has to produce agreeable solutions.

All things come to an end, and the only surviving competitive system of today is the modern world system, rudimentary as it is. Since all the states in the world now interact closely, only a *global system* seems possible, and it is merely a question of whether the present one will last. All previous systems have been destroyed in one way or another and some would say that such systems go through a certain 'life cycle': that they have some inner mechanism that limits their life-span. According to Wesson, state systems have a tendency to become simpler as time goes on, with fewer but stronger states, and this will eventually lead to a disruption of the balance of power and destroy the system.³

While it is true that many systems seem to display a tendency to reduce the number of polities operating within them, this does not appear to result in an upset in the balance of power. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were still a considerable number of competing polities in Europe. At least six first-rate states (Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia) were complemented by a number of smaller ones and there is no reason to suppose that this was not enough. In actual fact, when it came, the end of the European system was due to a combination of three factors.

Expansions

As Wesson confirms, it was the rise of a unified Germany to become an industrial giant that upset the balance.⁴ This reflects the effects of the modern expansion. Or, to put it in more general terms, expansion cycles tend to destabilize competitive systems. In this case, there was an additional factor – industrialization – that had never been encountered before, which profoundly alerted the balance. There have certainly been some competitive systems that have survived expansion cycles, Greece being the best example. Others might include the Gallic and Irish systems, although both seem to have undergone a fundamental transformation or reorganization. Some, however, have been destroyed as they destabilized and expanded. Expansion cycles result in dramatic fluctuations in the balance of power, as one after another the polities undergo militarization, democratization and expansion. This happened in Europe under Napoleon, although he was defeated and equilibrium restored, and later under Hitler, which terminally destroyed the balance of power in Europe. Other examples of expansion destroying the original competitive system include the Germanic expansion at the end of Antiquity or the Viking expansion. This may also apply to the Urnfield expansion, although we cannot be certain due to our limited knowledge.

The second factor affecting the end of the European system was conquest by external powers. In this case, it was two emerging superpowers, Russia and America, who divided Europe into spheres of influence between them. Both had originally risen as frontier empires to the European system. This is rather typical since the Greek, Etruscan and perhaps the Hellenistic systems also fell as their frontier empires conquered them. But competitive systems can also simply succumb to a larger or more powerful state without it necessarily originating as a frontier empire to the system. This almost happened to Greece under the Persian onslaught, and certainly applies to the Roman conquest of Gaul, the Norwegian subjugation of Iceland and the English occupation of Ireland.

The third factor was the emergence of the modern world system, which made a separate European system impossible. We have seen this before in the consolidation of the European system that destroyed the local systems in France and Italy. In these cases, the larger system enforces itself on the smaller one, and its members are compelled to compete in the wider world whether they like it or not.

A fourth factor that can sometimes influence the end of competitive systems is when its members feel compelled to unite in a single polity in order to be better equipped to deal with an external challenge. This apparently happened in the Anglo-Saxon system in

the face of Viking attacks, but also played a part in ending the French medieval system when it united against the English. This effect is also felt in Europe, even if it came too late to play a role in the system's demise. However, the development of the European Union can be interpreted as an effort to enhance Europe's collective competitiveness in the global system, although it remains to be seen whether it too will result in the formation of a single unified state.

Competitive systems come to their ends in different ways. The most dramatic end comes in an expansion cycle, and this is what awaits them all if they survive long enough. But some even manage to survive such convulsions. While many perish long before this happens, when they do, the causes are usually external. It appears very rare for competitive systems to be unified from within, except as a response to external threats. Only as these systems approach their expansion cycles does there seem to be a significant risk of a single polity overshadowing the system. This is what I call a Napoleon syndrome, and it can happen when the first polity to adopt a popular approach to warfare uses the advantage this brings to dominate the system, even to the point of destroying it before a system-wide expansion begins. A relatively small polity may not be able to do this, but France during the Revolution was certainly big enough. The rise of Napoleon in the European system is an example of this syndrome, and possibly also the rise of Sparta in the Greek system. Even if the trend was reversed and equilibrium re-established in both these cases, it is quite possible that some systems have been destroyed by a Napoleon syndrome, although patchy information makes it difficult to find clear examples. I sometimes wonder whether Sargon of Akkad, who conquered the Sumerian system around 2300 BC, represents such a case (see Appendix 1).

Apart from external threats and expansion cycles, competitive systems seem stable and can survive for several centuries. However, the general trend in world history has been towards greater inclusion and global integration, and this has inevitably led to the rise of a single world system that must eliminate all smaller ones.

Expansion Cycles

It seems that all competitive systems enter into expansion cycles, if they survive long enough, although it is possible that the modern global system will escape such a fate because of the profound social changes associated with modernization.

Basic Mechanism

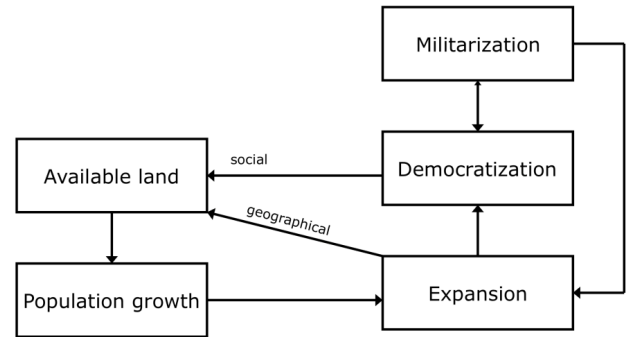


Figure 2. The basic mechanism of all expansion cycles, shown here without a prime mover.

Although most known expansion cycles have their roots in competitive systems, there are exceptions. At least two additional ‘flavours’ are known, which, even if they begin differently, behave in essentially the same way and are propelled by the same mechanism (Figure 2). A key factor is the availability of land for the common people which allows them to start families and thus fuels population growth. Population growth in turn drives a continued expansive effort that constantly adds new territories to the expanding society. The expansion itself makes new land available, besides stimulating democratization under frontier conditions where there is little scope for social stratification. This democratization also helps to make land socially and politically available to the commoners, as well as stimulating a reliance on a popular army rather than on an elite force of warriors. This militarization places power in the hands of the common warrior-farmer, reinforcing democratization and making expansion possible, even in the face of armed opposition.

Expansion cycles don’t just start by themselves. Even if they can continue by their own momentum once underway, they need a triggering mechanism to get going. It is how they are triggered, the *prime mover*, that distinguishes the three flavours of expansion cycles from each other.

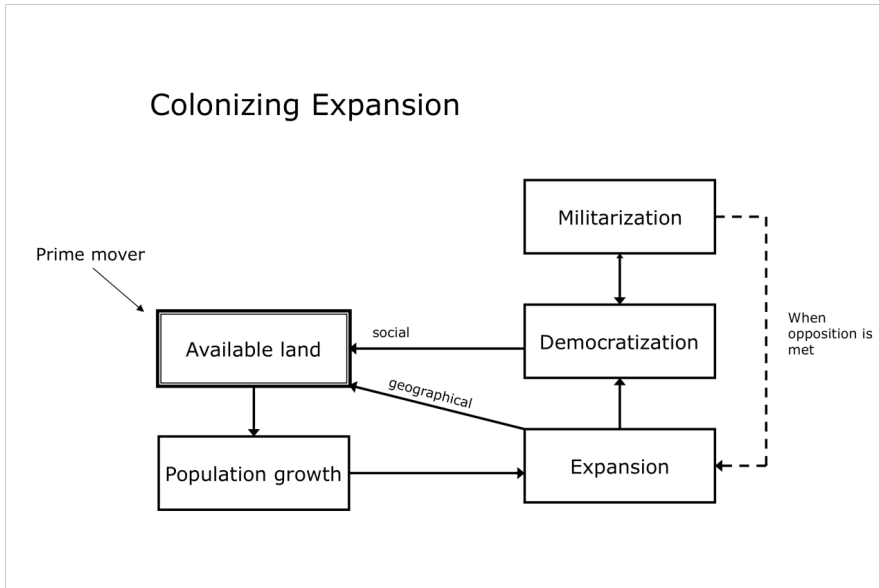


Figure 3. Colonizing expansion, with “Available land” indicated as the *prime mover*.

The simplest type of expansion cycle is colonizing expansion. It differs little from the basic description outlined above – all we need to do is add the prime mover that triggers the expansion, which, in this case, is the fortuitous emergence of new land ready for colonization. The original colonization of Europe by Neolithic farmers some six or eight thousand years ago would undoubtedly fit this description. So would the Slavic expansion, if it is correct that it began as Slavic farmers swarmed into the lands evacuated by the Germans, even if once on the move, these colonizing farmers were perfectly capable of turning themselves into conquering warriors, as they proved in the Balkans. Iceland was also colonized in this way, and it also played a major role in the European expansion in North America, although the latter is best explained as a hybrid of all the flavours of expansion cycles.

It appears to be a special characteristic of colonizing expansions that democratization is especially pronounced. The Slavic tribes were described as democracies; Iceland was more democratic than Norway and the Americans, more or less, invented modern democracy. The reason for this seems to be that empty land offers no opportunities for an economic elite. Only when the landscape fills up and farmland becomes scarce is there much profit in owning more of it than others. Only then does it become possible to derive income from allowing

others to live on ones land. During the settlement stage, frontier communities are primarily made up of farmers of broadly similar wealth and prosperity. Such communities have no need for an elite and usually do without one, but show a strong tendency towards democratic organization.

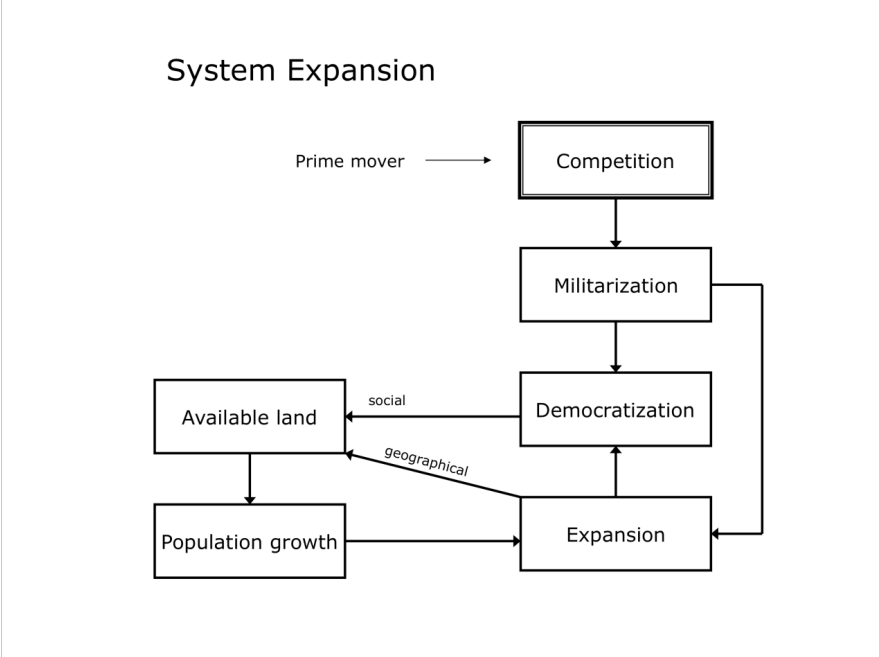


Figure 4. System expansion with systemic competition indicated as the *prime mover*.

The second flavour of expansion cycles is system expansion. This is the kind most often encountered in this book, and the most important in the present context. It offers a way for expansion cycles to appear in societies that do not appear to have any room for expansion. Here, the expansion is always at the expense of someone else, as all the land is occupied in one way or another, and it is the emergence of a competitive system that makes this possible.

The conditions for system expansions are military in the broadest sense of the word, including not only technologies and tactics but also ideologies, economics and social structure that all affect how wars are fought. In times of intense competition within competitive systems, when the general trend in military evolution is towards mass armies, this can – and sooner or later usually does – lead to the formation of popular armies. A mass army is simply an army based on numbers rather than specialized training and equipment. A popular army is

the ultimate expression of this trend, when the general population, or a significant part of it, is placed under arms. This citizen militia, which may sometimes even have become semi-professional by reason of long service, then becomes the armed force that society depends on for defence and attack. This, then, is militarization, the first of the three processes that go to make up expansion cycles of this common type. It is the competition between polities that causes militarization, thereby instigating a series of dramatic and sudden changes that throw society and the competitive system as a whole into upheaval. Changes that begin in one polity and bring it a competitive edge are soon copied throughout the system, spreading their effects all over it.

Militarization leads to democratization. Once the general population is armed, it cannot be denied increased political influence and this results in a widespread transference of power from the upper classes to the lower ones. Sometimes this leads to the formation of some kind of democratic government, but democratization does not necessarily go this far and is not always formalized in political institutions. Conversely, democratization can lead to bonapartism, a form of autocracy or dictatorship conducted in the name of the people. The Marxist term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' expresses this trend nicely. Whatever the case, the leaders of society are forced to take increased notice of the lower classes and become more sensitive to their interests. As a result, the common people are likely to have some of their basic desires fulfilled, if at all possible.

These system expansions generally involve agrarian societies. The exception is the modern cycle, but even this began in agrarian societies, although it ended in industrial ones. The most basic desire of the common people in agrarian societies is for land, which for them is the source of life, providing independence and the freedom to marry, have children and lead contented and fulfilling lives. Demands for land are therefore the first to be put forward by the emancipated masses. And as these same masses now also hold most of the military power, it is strongly advisable for the upper classes to meet their demands, if they possibly can. When confronted with a situation like this, it usually so happens that the upper classes have some land to spare – land they are using poorly as pasture or hunting grounds. We must then assume that the upper classes often parted with this land more or less willingly, not only to comply with popular demand but also to increase the number of warriors at their disposal. Such warriors were usually required to provide their own arms and armour and, therefore, had to be able to afford them.

In other cases, the transformation may have resulted in social revolution, by which the lower classes simply took the land they

Expansions

wanted and even eliminated the elite altogether. While the degree and nature of democratization was extremely varied, it always involved a significant shift in power in favour of the lower classes. In any case, the result was a more egalitarian ideology, frequently expressed in burial customs and discernable through the archaeological evidence. Also seen through archaeology is the intensification of farming, often in the form of crop-growing replacing animal husbandry to a greater or lesser extent. This occurred as the extensive aristocratic estates were divided between farmers, each with their own plot of intensively worked land.

Improved access to land for the common people meant that more of them could marry and raise families. In the absence of any catastrophes such as famine or pestilence, the result was a rising population – sometimes even a dramatic increase. In itself, this rising population was part of the third process of the cycle, the expansion itself. Although, by itself, a rise in population might result in some spillover into adjacent territories, territorial expansion becomes almost inevitable when it is coupled with military superiority through popular armies and a general demand for more land – a demand impossible to contain under democratization. The peoples of the competitive system then begin expanding their territories. Initially, this may be to some extent at the expense of each other, but it soon dawns on them that expanding outside the system is simpler and more profitable, which often leads to large-scale migrations.

As the expanding populations overcome alien polities, the indigenous population is often assimilated to a greater or lesser degree. In cases where the conquerors manage to appropriate large territories with small numbers, they usually become a new elite in their acquired lands. But if a more massive colonization takes place, the result can be an exported social revolution. The old elite in the conquered territories is eliminated, but the remaining lower classes are absorbed into the relatively egalitarian society of the invaders in one way or another. Once assimilated – and there is reason to believe that they often did so willingly – the indigenous masses simply added to the momentum of the expansion. A change of ethnicity in the wake of a migration is therefore not always simply a matter of one population supplanting another. It could be caused instead by what amounted to a social revolution as the indigenous lower classes adopted the identity of the egalitarian invaders.

Although significant population growth characterizes the approach to and early stages of system expansions, the net effect, when the dust settles, can be negative, at least in some places. Disruptions of expansion cycles are sometimes such that they cause

massive loss of lives and impede reproduction. Entire tribes can decide to emigrate, leaving their homelands empty. The Great Migrations of the 5th century AD probably resulted in a reduced overall population in Europe, although a greater part of the early medieval population slump should be ascribed to the plagues of the 6th and 7th centuries.

System expansions can occur both in barbarian and state systems. In state systems they seem to significantly endanger the survival of the state itself, by introducing egalitarian and democratic practices often incompatible with the strongly hierarchical organization of territorial states. The small, compact city-states of ancient Greece did survive an expansion cycle, but probably only because their small size allowed the direct participation of the people in decision making. This would have been difficult or impossible in larger states before the development of modern state bureaucracies. Perhaps this is why the barbarian zone in Europe survived for so long. In the more thinly settled north, populations sufficient to constitute a state tended to be spread all over the rural landscape and not concentrated in cities. Polities that developed state-like institutions were sooner or later subjected to the democratizing effects of expansion cycles and, since their population was too thinly spread over too large a territory to maintain a democratic state, they reverted to barbarism or were destroyed. States, civilization and literacy therefore appeared late and with difficulty, not only slowing the development of sophisticated governmental organization but also the accumulation of knowledge in general.

Only in the Mediterranean did the environment favour the formation of compact city-states, capable of surviving expansion cycles. Further north, repeated expansion cycles stimulated the resurrection of small polities that regrouped into new competitive systems, eventually producing new expansion cycles. This virtuous – or vicious – circle (depending on your point of view) continued until a Mediterranean empire managed to conquer a substantial part of the barbarian zone, bringing north the traditions of civilization that survived even after the remaining barbarians had destroyed the empire and laid the foundations of yet another competitive system. This time, however, it was a fully fledged state system that covered most of Europe and set it on the path to world domination, particularly since it managed to delay the inevitable expansion cycle until the states involved were ready to cope with it.

same time, the elite survives on older lands and provides the leadership and cohesion that turns a small state into a great empire, capable not only of destroying the original competitive system but also of becoming an unstoppable conquering machine. Because this empire building accommodates the interests of the elite and farmers alike, democratization can be limited, thereby permitting the survival of the state even as it balloons to a massive world empire.

Although this description applies first and foremost to Rome, it is possible that it could be made to fit, at least in part, examples such as Philip and Alexander's Macedonia, the USA in the 19th century, and even the Russian colonization of Siberia.

Colonizing expansions and empire expansions bear a close relationship to system expansions but these models certainly do not explain all kinds of expansion. Even if they can explain most of the barbarian expansions that Europe has witnessed (and most of the civilized ones as well), there are other kinds that are not discussed here. One of these is what we may call *elite expansion*, briefly mentioned in relation to the European system of the High Middle Ages (chapter 8) and there may very well be more. Since they have completely different origins, such expansions are not included in the term *expansion cycle*. Expansion, in the general sense, is a term that covers a whole range of phenomena, and there is no reason to suppose that they all share a common explanation.

Elitization

Expansion cycles are relatively short-lived episodes. Only in exceptional cases do they last more than a couple of centuries, and only then because of very special circumstances (as in the Germanic expansion, chapter 6). The reason for this is simply that expansion cannot go on forever. Sooner or later it either has expanded over all the territory available, or runs into an enemy powerful enough to defeat the invading popular armies. Sometimes this enemy is a society that has of necessity copied the expansionists' way of war, and will thus, if left to its own devices, sooner or later enter an expansion cycle of its own. In other cases, the enemy is an empire with a completely different social structure but still strong enough to repel the invaders. When the expansion stops, it dawns on the common people that there is no more land to be had, and although population growth may continue for some time, it gradually fades as fewer people are able to acquire land and start their own families.

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When expansion ends, a new development sets in which I have called elitization. It has two important aspects: one economic, the other military.

The economic aspect of elitization set in as soon as land was no longer freely available. When the demand for land significantly outstripped supply, it became more expensive and difficult to obtain. This situation favoured the rich and powerful. Those with the greatest power and wealth were in a good position to acquire more than their fair share of this limited resource and to use it to grow still more rich and powerful. Increasingly, the rest of the population lost their economic independence as they lost their lands through divided inheritance, mishap or just plain bullying, and it was always the emerging elite that benefitted. Through its wealth and influence, the elite was in a position to acquire most of the land that the commoners for some reason lost, and the landless became dependent on the rich to provide them with a means of support in the form of tenancies or employment. The result was a gradual growth in economic stratification, as the property pyramid assumed the characteristics of a Pareto distribution. No special events are required to explain economic stratification; it simply emerges through the economic laws that govern the distribution of limited resources.

The military aspect of elitization stems from the futility of wars that cannot provide new land for the warrior-farmers who have to fight them. This is when expansion stops and when it does, warfare basically becomes pointless from the perspective of the common warrior who is called upon to risk his life with no prospect of significant gain. However, although he is likely to become gradually less enthusiastic about war, traditions and the warrior ethos die hard, especially when they are linked to the rights and status of the free and full member of the political community. As was the case in Iceland in the mid-13th century (chapter 7), it sometimes takes a pointless war to bring home the lesson that warrior-farmers don't want to be warriors any more. Until this happens, the farmers remain politically strong through their military importance, even if many of them may have become economically dependent on the elite. Therefore, they are in a political position where they can simply refuse to fight.

Of course, the irony is that by refusing to exercise their military power, the warrior-farmers soon lose that power and the political power that went with it. So when the people refuse to fight the useless wars of the elite, the pendulum begins to swing back towards elite warfare. The elite now has to rely on itself and perhaps a few well-equipped and well-rewarded retainers to fight its battles. Commoners

soon lose the ability to fight effectively and war becomes a prerogative of the elite, often jealously guarded against any interference from the lower orders.

In effective centralized states, the economic elite rarely doubles as a military one. Instead, it relies on a professional army, although this is often led by elite members. But whether the new force is a professional army or warrior elite, it is much smaller than a popular army and, apart from guarding society from external threats, is primarily an instrument of power for the ruling classes and the state.

These smaller armies are necessarily less powerful than the popular armies of expansion cycles. The latter represent the culmination of military power but only exist in the context of expansion cycles. Military developments do not significantly play an independent role in determining the course of history. The rise of elite warfare is not primarily a reflection of military technology and tactics but rather of the inability of the elite to mobilize the masses, and an unwillingness to do so even when they can later on. In competitive systems, the elite is eventually forced to do so anyway. In strictly military terms, popular warfare has always been superior to elite warfare but the use of the masses in war is not independent of the social structure and is usually quite dangerous to the elite.

Perhaps we can discern, in very broad terms, extremely long-term fluctuations in European social and military developments, which may be a general condition of agrarian societies. Where competitive systems are easily formed, as seems to have been the case in Europe, expansion cycles lasting about two centuries alternate with longer periods of elitization and elite or state dominance.

When the Urnfield expansion cycle ended around 1100 BC, the next expansion cycle in Central Europe did not begin until around 450 BC, six or seven centuries later. The Germanic expansion was halted by the Romans until their defences collapsed around 400 AD, again six or seven centuries after the end of the Gallic expansion (3rd century BC). The Germanic expansion was over by the 6th century AD and the Slavic one by the 7th century. Six or seven centuries later, around 1300, we once again find signs of an emerging expansion cycle, although it was cut short. According to this pattern, the typical period of elitization between expansion cycles in Central Europe seems to have lasted six or seven centuries. The same interval or a slightly longer one may apply to Scandinavia, if we measure the time from the end of the first wave of Germanic expansion around the 1st century BC until the eve of the Viking Age in the 8th century AD. The Greeks were somewhat quicker. Less than five centuries passed from the fall of the Mycenaean civilization until they were expanding and

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colonizing in the Mediterranean. The general picture is one of episodes of elitization in Europe lasting about four to eight centuries.⁵ This is of course a huge simplification since expansion cycles rarely began consecutively at exactly the same location and tended to overlap and interfere with each other. In addition, when states and empires appeared, they influenced these developments to varying extents.

Alternating expansion cycles and elitizations do not indicate any general cyclical nature of human history. However, similar processes can appear again and again if the conditions are right, and it seems that Europe possessed just the right conditions – primarily in the form of a large and prosperous barbarian zone that obstructed the formation of world empires, while favouring the decentralization so conducive to the formation of competitive systems.

Establishing the typical interval between expansion cycles may make it possible to project these cycles further back into prehistory, beyond the Urnfield cycle. If this is indeed the case, we might then expect to find a still earlier expansion cycle beginning in Central Europe towards the end of the 3rd millennium BC, and another earlier one around 3000 BC. Apart from the original expansion of agriculture, which was of course an expansion cycle of sorts, we can hardly expect to find many expansion cycles in Europe at earlier dates. However, it indeed seems possible that the expansions of two well-known archaeological cultures do in fact broadly fit these dates, the earlier being the Corded Ware culture and the later the Bell Beaker culture. The Corded Ware expansion, which spread a uniform culture over most of Central, Northern and Eastern Europe, is often, though disputably, associated with the spread of Indo-European languages in Europe. Possibly an offshoot of the Corded Ware culture, the Bell Beaker culture achieved a wide distribution in Central Europe and along the Atlantic coast.⁶ However, these and possibly other prehistoric expansion cycles may not be exactly identical to their better-known historical counterparts, particularly since true elite warfare probably only emerged with the advent of sophisticated bronze metallurgy around 2000 BC. As a result, there may be subtle differences in the sequence of events leading up to expansion, but the general model of expansion cycles still looks promising when seeking an explanation.

Most European expansion cycles were barbarian in nature. After the time of the ancient expansions of the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans, few if any civilized expansion cycles occurred until the modern period. Several barbarian expansions occurred during the first half of this interval of almost 2,000 years, but after that there

were none. For the civilized parts of Europe, this was generally a period of elitization, and although wars were frequent, they were limited in character. These were not total wars in which whole societies fought for their existence, but 'chess-like' affairs fought with small armies of professionals.⁷ Their outcome only really affected the elite in any significant way, and the common people continued toiling on the land and paying their rents and taxes. Who received these payments mattered little to them.

During times of elitization and elite dominance, there is a decided competitive advantage in better organization and this often leads to the formation of states – a very important development, especially when the competition once again creates mass armies. The Greek city-states survived an expansion cycle by simply becoming more or less democratic. This, however, is rather an exceptional case only made possible by their compact size, which made direct democracy possible in spite of centralization. In larger polities, whether in terms of population or territory, large democratic states were not possible until the modern period, and this caused a problem for states and state-like polities as they entered into an expansion cycle, with its accompanying democratization. Undemocratic territorial states were simply incompatible with the democratization process of the expansion cycle. When the two clashed, something would have to give, and in early societies it appears that it was the centralizing tendencies that were usually reversed as can be seen in the Germanic expansion and probably the Irish one as well. Conversely, if a strong state had developed it stood a chance of stopping the expansion cycle from happening, by limiting mass armies to state-sponsored standing armies and disarming the population as happened in early modern Europe. In this case, the development of mass armies did not immediately lead to an expansion cycle. Instead, it was postponed by the growing central authority, the same organization that made large democratic states possible once democratization finally broke through with the revolutions of the late 18th century.

But pure chance also played a part. It remains highly questionable whether states would have been able to control the popular revolts of the Late Middle Ages had the plague not already relieved population pressure and removed some of the urgency from popular demands. What would have happened had the plague not occurred in 14th century Europe and the states been unable to prevent the transference of power to the masses by quelling peasant revolts and containing the Swiss? Europe would certainly have experienced a new expansion cycle with unlimited warfare and popular armies. The old aristocracy would have lost much of its power, and we would expect to

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see the development of democratic institutions in relatively egalitarian societies. Unless the expansion cycle proved particularly destructive, we would also expect considerable population growth and a territorial expansion from Europe into adjacent territories or overseas. The old states would probably have crumbled and split up unless they were able to save themselves by quickly developing the administration necessary for large democratic states. By the 16th century, the dust would have begun to settle, but what the modern world would then have looked like is anyone's guess.

* * *

The barbarians of Europe proved remarkably resilient to conquest by empires. Europe was not favoured by an especially productive environment such as those of the river valleys of Mesopotamia or Egypt, and its nature and landscapes did not facilitate the early formation of large states or empires. Only the Mediterranean, with its easy sea routes, assisted in the formation of an empire – that of Rome – but the Roman Empire only conquered a part of the European interior and eventually fell to the centrifugal forces of barbarian Europe. While intense competition kept barbarian Europe abreast of military and technological developments, repeated expansion cycles delayed and retarded the formation of states, except in the south. This effectively prevented the formation of large empires and kept Europe divided, competitive and vibrant. This, then, is Europe's barbarian heritage, which it has brought to the world through its last expansion cycle. The barbarians were not simply some wild and uncouth ancestors that we are embarrassed about. They played an essential part in shaping the world in which we live.

¹ This gives the evolution of human societies a *Lamarckian* quality. Of course one can use Dawkins' idea of *memes* as a substitute for genes. See chapter 1.

² Wesson (1978), pp. 41-60, 185-189.

³ Wesson (1978), pp. 35-36. But cf. his earlier work (1967) where he states: "There appears to be no general law of decay" (p. 13).

⁴ Wesson (1978), pp. 218-219.

⁵ These episodes of elitization and expansion seem to fit very well with the schematized picture of Central Europe given by Kristiansen (1998, p. 412) – of periods of communal burial and intensive agriculture (Otomani 2000-1500 BC, Urnfield 1250-750 BC and La Tène 450-0 BC) alternating with periods of animal husbandry and ornate chiefly burials (Tumulus 1600-1250 BC and Hallstatt 750-450 BC), with the former appearing abruptly after expansion cycles but gradually giving way to elitization.

⁶ In recent years, the distribution of bell beakers and associated finds has usually been interpreted as cultural diffusion: see Shennan (1986) for an

attempt to explain this in terms of peer polity interaction. On the other hand, Price et al. (1998) showed, through measurements of strontium isotopes in skeletal remains, that there was a significant migratory element in the formation of the Bell Beaker Culture in Bavaria. In addition, we know that the signature element of this culture, the bell beakers, had uses other than purely ritual ones (such as in the consumption of alcoholic beverages) and were locally made (Guerra-Doce, 2006). To my mind, this indicates not only movements of ideas or artefacts but probably of the pottery-makers themselves (see also Brodie, 1997). In most cases these were non-elite women and the movement of non-elite women probably indicates a considerable migratory element.

⁷ As pointed out by Keeley (1996), pp. 176-177.

APPENDIX 1: COMPETITION AND EXPANSION OUTSIDE EUROPE

Restricting the present study to Europe is simply a matter of convenience, and competitive systems and expansion cycles were not, of course, only confined to this part of the world. With this in mind, I feel obliged to mention just a few examples, in order to give some idea of their importance in world history and demonstrate the possibilities of similar research elsewhere.

The Sumerian civilization, which emerged in southern Mesopotamia (Iraq) in the late 4th millennium BC, is generally accepted to be the oldest in the world. This is the place and time at which true writing first appeared, along with some of the earliest states and cities that we know of. The wheel was possibly invented here, and bronze metallurgy and other technologies developed rapidly. Sumer, fairly obviously, was a competitive system made up of several independent city-states with a shared culture but which nevertheless competed fiercely among themselves. That the first civilization should emerge in a competitive system is only to be expected since such systems habitually encourage innovation. It seems possible that Sumerian civilization went through an expansion cycle in the *Jemdat Nasr* period (ca. 3200/3100 – 2900 BC), although evidence from this time is scarce and difficult to interpret. The period appears to have been a time of disturbance and great shifts in settlements. It was followed, in the 3rd millennium BC, by increased stratification, just as would be expected when elitization sets in after an egalitarian expansion cycle.¹

The Sumerian system lasted until it was conquered in the 24th or 23rd century BC (the chronology is uncertain) by King Sargon and his Akkadians. It seems possible that this happened as Sumer was approaching a new expansion cycle but then fell prey to a *Napoleon syndrome* (see p. 283) under the leadership of Sargon, who managed to conquer the entire system, thereby destroying it and cutting the expansion cycle short.²

During the Eastern Zhou dynasty in China (8th to 3rd century BC) the monarchy ceased to function and was replaced by a sort of feudal anarchy that gradually developed into a system of powerful centralized states – a development reminiscent of medieval Europe. There is no doubt that a competitive system existed in China in these times, a fact confirmed by its cultural dynamism. This was the time of Laozi (Lao Tse), Confucius and Sunzi (Sun Tsu). In the latter half of

the period, the 'Warring States' epoch, the states fought almost ceaselessly and their armies burgeoned to huge proportions when the peasantry was recruited as massed infantry. Perhaps China was on the brink of an expansion cycle; perhaps some kind of expansion cycle even did take place. Whatever the case, the system was destroyed in the late 3rd century BC, when the state of Qin, which we can probably interpret as a frontier empire, conquered all the rest and established the Chinese Empire.³

Having already begun in the 1st millennium BC, the growth of the Mayan civilization in Central America reached its peak in the 1st millennium AD, only to collapse spectacularly in the 9th century. As the script they used is still not fully understood, our knowledge of the Mayans is sketchy, but it seems clear that their civilization was comprised of a collection of states with impressive cities at their centres and frequently at war with each other – in other words, a competitive system.⁴

The New World possessed neither metallurgy nor horses, the two entities that became the foundations of elite warfare in the Old World. It is therefore difficult to see how New World states and societies could have developed elite warfare to the same extent as those of the Old one. This meant that the Mayan states did not have the same coercive means as their counterparts across the Atlantic, and their social elites had to rely on other means of justifying and enhancing their power. Perhaps this explains the excessive emphasis on ritual, apparent in Mayan civilization, with human sacrifice and self-mutilation practised widely by the elite.

The collapse of Mayan civilization is a mystery to which no really satisfying answer has ever been found, although theories abound. We have learned that if they survive, all competitive systems experience expansion cycles, and it seems possible that the Mayan collapse is an extreme example of how destructive these can be. The democratization of these cycles is incompatible with most early states and can cause them to crumble as the common people demand their share of wealth and power. Some theorists do, indeed, postulate peasant revolts as the cause of Mayan collapse and there are indications of massive emigration and relocation in the Yucatán Peninsula, where their civilization survived for centuries.⁵

Medieval Japan experienced a kind of 'feudal' decentralization, even if it was nominally a single state under the rule of the emperor. The result was growing competition between the warlords, with the most powerful usually claiming the title of *shogun*. During the *Sengoku* period (ca. 1450-1600) Japan was plunged into extreme warfare and social upheaval as armies became progressively larger. If

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we can interpret these Japanese 'warring states' as forming a competitive system, it may also be possible to interpret their eventual unification as representing a Napoleon syndrome or something similar. This was mostly accomplished by Oda Nobunaga and his lower-class successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, in the late 16th century.⁶

Other likely candidates for expansion cycles that can be mentioned include the Phoenicians of the early 1st millennium BC who lived in a number of city-states in the Levant, and established several colonies around the Mediterranean. Competitive systems probably also existed in early India, and the occurrence of expansion cycles may help to explain how a relatively uniform civilization spread over the whole subcontinent.

No doubt many other examples have existed, some poorly known or not known at all. The detailed knowledge necessary for easy identification is usually dependent on written sources, leaving out most barbarian societies. The European experience indicates that the civilized south may have been less prone to expansion cycles than the barbarian north, for which it still provided considerable written evidence. Where states and civilizations emerged, there was a tendency towards greater concentration of power resulting in the formation of large empires. These not only precluded the formation of competitive systems but also destroyed them as they grew, and were often powerful enough to withstand expansions breaking on their borders. We are therefore better acquainted with the relatively few instances of civilized competitive systems and expansions than with their barbarian counterparts. Dozens of other expansion cycles have probably occurred all over the world that are just waiting to be discovered.

¹ See Crawford (2004), pp. 30-33, 44-45.

² For the Sumerian system, see Song Nai Rhee (1981); Crawford (2004).

³ See e.g. Hui (2005); Hsu (1999); Lewis (1999).

⁴ The old image of Mayan civilization as being peace-loving has now been completely abandoned.

⁵ For the Mayan system, see Freidel (1986); Sabloff (1986); Drew (1999); Diamond (2005), pp. 157-177.

⁶ See Souyri (2002), pp. 181-217; Totman (1993), pp. 37-99.

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